

Current Comments

Sax Discrimination

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The last time I bent *Current Comments*[®] readers' collective ear to discuss my love for the saxophone,¹ I said I had never encountered a commercial recording by a woman saxophone player. A few readers wrote to me to remedy this situation. A subsequent investigation showed that there are relatively few women sax players. However, we were able to compile a brief list of recordings made by women saxophonists. It appears in Table 1.

The paucity of women sax players raises the touchy question of sex discrimination. It is true that some of the greats of jazz are women. However, according to some of the female saxists we spoke with, some forms of musical expression were considered "unladylike" for many years. Voice, piano, and flute seem to have been some of the acceptable musical media for women. But apparently other instruments, including the saxophone, were perceived as "masculine." One reason for this may be that in the early 1900s, the sax was considered primarily an instrument for military bands.² Fortunately, sex discrimination in music is on the wane.

At the Sixth Annual World Saxophone Congress (WSC) at Northwestern University, in June of 1979, I made an effort to identify women sax players who had made solo recordings and who could be helpful in compiling this essay. Perhaps the most surprising result of my quest was this: none of the women with

whom I spoke at the Congress could understand why I wanted to do such an article. If I was at a scientific meeting and said I was writing an article about women scientists, there would be a high degree of interest. I would get a variety of strong opinions on the subject of sex discrimination in science. The lack of interest on the part of the women saxophone players indicated to me that many in the world of music feel a musician's gender is irrelevant. Those women I spoke with at the WSC seemed to think that if a woman had talent, she had no problems in competing successfully with her male counterparts. But as we learned, not all women saxophonists feel this way.

One statement most women saxists would probably agree with is that women jazz musicians are more welcome now than ever before. But the field of women's jazz sax has had some interesting pioneers. Fred L. Hemke of Northwestern University, a notable classical saxophonist in his own right, published a dissertation on the early history of the saxophone. His account contains some interesting stories about women sax players, particularly from the early decades of this century.³ One of the first American female sax players was Elise Hall. At the turn of the century, her doctor suggested she take up music to combat her apathy and depression. She chose the sax and became quite good. She was the first US performer of

Table 1. Some recordings by women saxophone players.

Bloom, Jane Ira

We Are. Outline Records OTL-137
(P.O. Box 104, Waban, MA 02168)

Redd, Vi

Bard Call. United Artists 01516

Stobart, Kathy

Arbeia. Spotlite SPJ 509

Saxploitation. Spotlite SPJ 503

Take It from the Top (with Humphrey Lyttelton). Black Lion Records BLP 12134
Kansas City Woman (with Humphrey Lyttelton and Buddy Tate). Black Lion Records BLP 30163

Thompson, Barbara

Wilde Tales. MCA-MCF 3047

Paraphernalia. MCA-MCF 2852

Jubiaba. MCA-MCF 2852

Variations (with Andrew Lloyd Webber). MCA-MCF 2824

Just Music (with The Don Kendall Five). Spotlite SPJ 502

Miscellaneous Artists

Women in Jazz (includes Barbara Thompson and Kathy Stobart). Stash 109.

solo sax, and the first amateur to play with the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Notably, she commissioned Debussy's *Rhapsodie* for orchestra and solo sax.³ (p. 433)

In the 1920s Kathryn E. Thompson directed the Southern California Saxophone Band. She also gave sax lessons in Los Angeles. Some of her female students became successful vaudeville artists. One, Mary Campbell, was a beauty contest winner. She attributed her beauty to the exercise that sax playing gave her face and neck muscles.³ (p. 453-4) A pair of twins joined at the hip from birth who studied under Thompson were Violet and Daisey Hilton. The British saxophone duo was billed as "The United Twins" by vaudeville.³ (p. 453-4) Another female sax player during the vaudeville era was Marie McNeil. She also directed "The Highlanders," a women's alto saxophone sextet. The group consisted of two altos, a C mel-

ody, a B-flat tenor, a baritone, and a bass sax.³ (p. 449) The modern counterpart of these groups is the all-female rock band, such as the "Raincoats" or the "Mo-dettes" of the UK. Incidentally, contemporary rock music has produced a few women sax players. Singer-songwriter Lene Lovich plays tenor sax on her albums *Stateless* (Stiff/Epic JE 36102) and *Flex* (Stiff/Epic JE 36308). And a singer and composer named Lora Logic plays tenor and soprano sax for a band called "Essential Logic" on the album *Beat Rhythm News* (Rough Trade 5).

Unfortunately, there are only a handful of well-known contemporary women sax players. Jane Ira Bloom, a soprano and alto saxist, produced and recorded an album with bassist Kent McLagan. Bloom graduated from Yale University with a BA in music in 1977. She was also listed in *Downbeat's* 27th Annual International Jazz Critics Poll.⁴ Another American, Vi Redd, an alto player based in Kansas City, Missouri, has cut an album called *Bard Call*.

My recent visit to our UK branch in Uxbridge reminded me that I had not finished the research I began at the WSC. Last fall I mentioned the subject matter of this essay to my friend Margaret Crowther in Paris. Margaret handles publicity for several French artists and musicians, including Max Collié, whose "Rhythm Aces" are probably the best Dixieland group in the world today. Margaret asked me if I had ever heard of Carol McBean, who had made a recording with Ivy Benson. (More about Ivy later.) She gave me the telephone numbers of a few musicians in London. Eventually I tracked Carol down to Torpoint, a little town on the Cornwall-Devonshire border. In a telephone conversation Carol proved to be quite ebullient and agreed to send me some of her tapes. Almost a year later I called her again and she convinced me to take the four-hour train and ferry ride to Torpoint.

I was greeted at the door by Carol's husband, Eddie Gasser, a trombonist for the Royal Marine Band. Carol was about seven months pregnant, which seemed to emphasize all-too-well the difficult choice a female artist may have to make. This will be her second child. Nancy, age 3½, was bouncing around all during our "interview." Carol told me that as soon as the baby arrived she would be working again. She had been playing for over 15 years and while she enjoyed domestic life she eventually had to "have a blow."

When I showed Carol what I had written so far she told me of her many encounters with male musicians who had been conditioned against the idea of women jazz musicians. "When I had to go to a club and ask the piano player if I could have a go he'd be in a state of shock. But after I played a few numbers he would try to hire me on the spot." So maybe the problem is not really discrimination *per se* but bad conditioning.

In 1976, a record store clerk suggested to Carol that she audition with Ivy. Ivy asked Carol to play tenor sax on a recording she was making. Carol took the train to London and finished the recording in one nine-hour session. The recording has not yet been released. Ivy describes Carol as "brilliant . . . absolutely jazz."⁵

Ivy is not too well known to Americans, but today her records are collectors' items in the UK where she is a legend. During World War II she organized "Ivy Benson's All Girl Band" and has been playing the big band sound ever since. The band played for servicemen all over Europe and parts of the Middle East during the war. Although she has played sax and clarinet since age 15, she is basically a pianist. She began to study piano when she was five years old. She tells us she has certainly observed sex discrimination: "I've had it all my life." But her career shows it can be overcome. At age 63 she is still going

strong. Along the way she has boosted other female musicians, including the well-known British saxophonists Kathy Stobart and Barbara Thompson.⁵

I didn't hear of Kathy until last year at Dobells' jazz record shop in London. This of course displays my American provincialism because Kathy had been playing with Humphrey Lyttelton for years. She is the featured sax player on two impressive albums made by Lyttelton in 1975 in London. I won't say too much about Lyttelton, but if you are interested in further details you can consult his book *Take It from the Top*,⁶ named after the record of the same title. On this record Stobart does some wonderful solos on baritone sax, not a particularly "feminine" instrument if one is obsessed with the idea that small is beautiful or feminine.

Stobart apparently joined Lyttelton's band in the late 1950s. They made a record entitled *Kath Meets Humph*, which I have not yet been able to obtain. Lyttelton's composition "Rain," originally included on that album, is part of *Take It from the Top*, and it is a delight. If you are fortunate enough to possess the album please let me know or send a tape. Another Lyttelton record, *Kansas City Woman*, includes original compositions by Buck Clayton, known to Count Basie and Benny Goodman fans. On it Stobart is in excellent company with Buddy Tate sitting in for Clayton.

In the spring of 1978 Stobart recorded an album for the first time with her own group. The result is an impressive effort called *Arbeia*, which is the name of her own composition. Stobart writes and plays in a melodic "traditional" style that most jazz fans can appreciate or relax to.

Thompson is another matter. If you like John Coltrane, you'll probably love Thompson. Her work is rooted in the Coltrane tradition of playing as many as four chords in place of each one in the standard progression. This is a style Col-

trane pioneered in the late 1950s. Obviously it takes more notes to play four chords instead of one. To do this in a short space Coltrane had to play at a blazing speed. According to James Lincoln Collier in *The Making of Jazz*, "To make his method work he at times was compelled to place an odd number of notes over an even number of beats, and this forced him into irregular time patterns that departed widely from the basic beat. . . . Sometimes he was playing at speeds approaching a thousand notes a minute, not an impossible speed for a classically trained pianist, but unusual in jazz."⁷ (p. 483) As Collier says about Coltrane, there are times when all this gets beyond modern jazz improvisation and there seems to be more simple key-flapping than any orderly progression of chords. But understanding the cause of "noise" doesn't change hearing it into a pleasurable experience. Still, listening to demanding music may give you the patience to hold out for what is really worthwhile.

While you can detect several influences at work in Thompson's music, after you've heard her records several times you have to realize that this is after all the Thompson sound—and a wonderful, warm and vibrant sound it is.

On her first recording in 1974, she played on the Don Kendall Five's *Just Music* album. This is a series of BBC taped performances. Thompson now leads two bands. "Paraphernalia" is the name of a group she has led since 1973. The album *Paraphernalia*, released in 1978, is a collection of eight songs, seven of which Barbara composed. It sold 4,000 copies in the UK, which is remarkable for a jazz album. A sale of 1,000 copies is considered unusual.⁸

I was particularly struck by "Spanish Memories" on *Paraphernalia*. As a great fan of Jan Garbarek, the Norwegian saxophonist, the melancholy quality of Garbarek was evident in Barbara's play-

ing. But when she plays "Stairways" you are reminded of Stanley Turrentine.

Barbara's other band is a nine-piece Latin-based outfit called "Jubiaba." The name is Portuguese for "old voodoo priest." The idea for this group came to Barbara after she heard a similar American band at Ronnie Scott's jazz club in London's Soho district. The 1978 album *Jubiaba* is all original music, including "The Funky Flunky" and "Touch of Blue." The first is well named.

Thompson also played sax and clarinet on Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Variations* album. Webber is best known to American audiences as coauthor, with Tim Rice, of the musicals *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Evita*. *Variations* was awarded gold record status in Britain. For Thompson, it led to a five-record contract with MCA. Her latest venture is *Wilde Tales*. It features a Thompson composition, "The Selfish Giant," based on Oscar Wilde's children's story of the same name. Like *Paraphernalia*, *Wilde Tales* became one of the top five British jazz discs within weeks of release.⁸

According to a recent article in the London *Telegraph Sunday Magazine*, Thompson is on the brink of fame as an international jazz star.⁸ Obviously such an event would go far toward eroding sex discrimination in jazz. On sex discrimination, Thompson is quoted as saying, "I've been lucky to work with musicians who have judged me almost entirely on my ability. But there are people who like to think that what I do is primarily in the cause of female emancipation." ⁸ At any rate, Barbara has a great future in a fiercely competitive business.

While there seems to be a high level of awareness of women jazz musicians in the UK, they remain relatively rare and obscure in the US. To remedy that situation, the first Women's Jazz Festival (WJF) was held in 1978 in Kansas City,

Missouri. It was organized by disc jockey Dianne Gregg and singer-pianist Carol Comer.⁹ Comer tells us that women have never had role models in jazz, have been discouraged from auditioning, and have faced an indifferent recording industry.¹⁰ Hence the annual WJF, which draws attention to the fact that women can play jazz. The 1980 festival, also held in Kansas City, was covered by the *Christian Science Monitor*,¹¹ *The Nation*,¹² and the *NBC Nightly News*.

The festival also publishes an annual *National Directory of Female Jazz Performers*. The foreword to the 1980 edition asserts: "When promoters, producers, bookers et al. are confronted with the question of why they don't often utilize the talents of women jazz artists, they almost invariably reply, 'I would love to feature more women but I don't know who they are or how to reach them.' That problem has been solved with the publication of this directory."¹³ (p. 2)

The directory, organized by state, lists the names, addresses, phone numbers, performing experience, union affiliation, willingness to travel, and preferred playing style of about 350 US female jazz musicians. It also lists them according to instrument. The WJF lists musicians for free, but a copy of the directory costs \$2.50. Those who want a copy, or who want to be listed in the next edition, should write to Women's Jazz Festival, Inc., P.O. Box 22321, Kansas City, Missouri 64113.

The 1980 directory lists about 40 US female saxists. No doubt there are more than that in this country; Redd, for example, isn't listed, and it's unlikely that every professional woman sax player in the US has heard of the WJF or its directory. Of the women listed, none, except for Bloom, has made a solo recording. Some have backed up other musicians. For example, Jean Fineberg, a New

York City flutist and tenor, alto, and soprano saxist, has appeared on 11 records. Among them are the disco group "Chic's" *C'est Chic* (Atlantic SD 19209) and David Bowie's soul album *Young Americans* (RCA ADL1-0098). Several of the saxophonists in the WJF directory, Fineberg included, lead or play in live bands.

We telephoned some of the sax players listed in the directory to get their views on sex discrimination in jazz. All of them agreed that the climate for women in jazz has greatly improved within the last decade. But they were divided on the topic of whether discrimination still exists. A woman sax player in New Mexico told us some club managers listen to auditions with their backs turned to the musicians. Presumably this makes it impossible to tell the musicians' gender. A California woman says women are "more than equal" to male jazz musicians today, because it's almost "like a gimmick" for women to play jazz. "It's almost hip to be a musician and a woman," seconds a musician in Woodstock, New York. "It can work in one's favor." An Illinoisian says men in audiences are still surprised to see a woman play a gig. Some men feel uncomfortable but relax when they hear that the woman can play. A Michigan saxist believes it's still an uphill fight for women, though. "The effort has to come from the woman. . . . She has to get good enough so the guys will sit up and say 'Whoa, she's good.' "

Some women believe women's own perceptions of the jazz scene are holding them back. A Maine sax player says many women think they can't play jazz because they've never seen it done before. She also raises the "femininity" issue: "We think we're supposed to look a certain way. . . . We're afraid to get up and really blow." Another California saxist who is forming a jazz band says

women experience psychological pressures when "trespassing" on traditional male territory. As a result, she says she has had to overcome the discomfort caused by the fact that she is supervising male musicians. Still, she plans to forge ahead.

Yet another Californian says most serious female sax players haven't yet reached their peak simply because they're too young. "I think that in about 10 years you're going to see a lot of mature women saxophone players who really have it together."

While there doesn't seem to be a women's movement *per se* in jazz, women are indeed gradually coming into

their own as serious musicians. The development of events such as the WJF is providing the needed support and helping to erode the barriers of discrimination. I expect that we'll soon be seeing more women gain national reputations as jazz musicians. I further expect that their presence will enhance and enrich the world of jazz.

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