The Girls in the Band

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Judy Chaikin’s film The Girls in the Band offers a unique and relatively comprehensive documentary about the contributions, struggles, aesthetics, and life experiences of important women jazz musicians, mostly American, who were (and some of whom have remained) active since the early decades of the twentieth century. The film covers a variety of important periods and successfully connects them to contemporaneous historical phenomena such as the vaudeville networks of the 1920s and 1930s; the swing explosion during the Great Depression; the expanding role of women in big bands during World War II; the economic struggles of jazz musicians during the 1950s with the rising popularity of rock ‘n’ roll, and new audiovisual media such as television. The documentary also covers important movements relating to women’s changing position in society from the women’s movement during the 1960s and 1970s, and finally to the slowly but steadily rising position of women in the international jazz (festival) circuits from the 1980s to the present. It is inspiring to witness such prodigious and virtuosic women active in several of these periods, especially considering the rampant sexism and racism in earlier decades, which when combined with other challenges connected to new cultural and musical/entertainment trends, remained considerable obstacles for jazz women’s visibility and canonization. Further, rather than undertaking the virtually impossible task of presenting a “who’s who” of women in jazz, the film highlights less than a dozen women from different eras, which effectively draws us closer to them and offers viewers a more personal and nuanced musical engagement with their past and present contributions. These women are prominent and important for American jazz, yet Chaikin and others may have chosen ten other prolific musicians for an equally successful film. For example Hazel Scott, Dorothy Donegan, Valaida Snow, Vi Burnside, Ina Ray Hutton, and even pop jazz fusion artist Joni Mitchell could have provided fascinating portraits, had many of these women lived to see the release of this film or prior women in jazz documentaries.

Given the press coverage surrounding the documentary’s release (“It’s a cultural travesty that the women of early jazz … have become a neglected footnote in music history, but Judy Chaikin’s well-researched, buoyantly entertaining documentary portrait could be a corrective” writes Aaron Hillis in Voice; “This pic may prompt a rewrite
of jazz history,” notes Robert Koehler in Variety), one has the impression that such an overview of women jazz musicians is the first to finally represent the most important women actively contributing to the jazz past. While some critics have reacted to the film as the first to credit women in jazz, there are a number of other audiovisual sources available, which have circulated since the 1920s, which document women’s active and rigorous presence in the jazz world. The present documentary, for instance, duplicates footage from earlier sources, including Greta Schiller and Andrea Weiss’s two documentaries The International Sweethearts of Rhythm (1986) and Tiny and Ruby: Hell Diving Women (1988). Another pioneering audiovisual advocate for women in jazz was Rosetta Reitz, one of the first activists and archivists of women in blues and jazz, who established her own record company during the 1970s. Reitz re-released several recordings of prominent multi-faceted female performers including Bessie Smith, Ida Cox, and Ma Rainey, women whose innovative urban blues recordings profoundly altered the entertainment landscape for both women and people of color during the jazz and vaudeville era. Reitz was significant for her record label, Rosetta Records, which was one of the first to celebrate and promote the recordings of these pioneering jazz and blues women. Too often retrospectives on women and jazz willingly disavow the contributions of prior collectors and advocates, as if each new generation must excavate, once again, the activities and contributions of such innovative and singular musicians in a process of reversing our cultural amnesia.

Other footage of the documentary is taken from both mainstream and lesser known sources, such as the short subject films by Vitaphone from the 1920s (The Ingenues’ The Band Beautiful, from 1928) and Paramount (Ina Ray Hutton’s Accent on Girls, Paramount in 1936 and Swing, Hutton Swing from 1937), to various Soundies of the International Sweethearts of Rhythm (Harlem Jam Session and Jump Children, both from 1946), as well as independent black films of the 1940s including director William Alexander’s film featuring the International Sweethearts of Rhythm, That Man of Mine (1946). 1950s and 1960s era television clips provide lesser known footage of the activities of jazz women as leaders of all-girl bands (Ada Leonard’s Search for Girls in 1951 and The Ina Ray Hutton Show from 1951 and 1956) and as soloists in an era of new audiovisual performance opportunities for film and television, an era paradoxically emerging against a climate of decreasing live music gigs in jazz and dance venues along-side further challenges presented by the intense competition from the rising teen culture of rock ‘n’ roll. From this transitional period, and interspersed amongst interview material from star “trumpetiste” Clora Bryant, a clip of a visually stunning Bryant on The Ed Sullivan Show (Figure 1) affirms that a woman can deliver cutting blues choruses while confined to form fitting fish-tail satin gowns.

The documentary also presents a combination of new and old interview material from both seasoned and younger musicians, including archival audio clips from live

presentations of Anna Mae Winburn, singer and bandleader of the International Sweethearts of Rhythm, and captivating discourse from recent Grammy award winner Esperanza Spalding. Indeed, the absolute strengths of this well-constituted and entertaining documentary are the fascinating, poetic, engaging, and sometimes bawdy and riotous stories told by these jazz women instrumentalists. Featured most prominently throughout the documentary are Clora Bryant, Rosalind (Roz) Cron, Patrice Rushen, Jane Ira Bloom, Billie Rogers, Peggy Gilbert, Carline Ray, Terri Lyne Carrington, Marion McPartland, Maria Schneider, and to a lesser extent Esperanza Spalding and Ingrid Jensen. Other women also appear as prominent soloists with little interview material including Nedra Wheller, Willie Mae Wong, Helen Jones Woods, Geri Allen, Anne Patterson, Carly Bley, Sherrie Maricle, and selected members of Diva and Maiden Voyage. These women’s stories are beautifully interwoven into sequences of virtuosic musical footage of live concerts, films, jam sessions, and rehearsals.

Other interview subjects were apparently chosen because of their proximity to women in jazz, such as Billy Taylor, who often employed women in his jazz orchestra, as well as famous male jazz musicians such as Herbie Hancock. Yet unlike other jazz documentaries such as Ken Burns’s Jazz (2001), few jazz scholars are consulted as subjects within the film, with the exception of the eloquent Tammy Kernodle,3 whose expertise on Mary Lou Williams is an important facet of the film. Kernodle’s contribution is especially relevant since Mary Lou Williams’s voice is not present, although excellent footage of Williams’s playing from both her early career in the US with Andy Kirk and excerpts are incorporated from her sacred compositions (Black Christ of the Andes) after her return to the US from Paris in the 1960s.

3In the interest of full disclosure, Dr. Kernodle is the Media Editor for this journal. Given her involvement in this film, she played no role in the review or editing of this essay.
Finally, one of the most enjoyable and important contributions of this film is the montage of footage of musicians from so many different eras, from the all-girl vaudeville bands active during the 1920s and 1930s including the Faydettes and Ina Ray Hutton’s Melodears, to the swinging bands of the 1940s and especially the International Sweethearts of Rhythms, to the concert footage of soloists Mary Lou Williams and Mary McPartland from the famous 1977 Kansas City Women’s Jazz Festival, to the second wave of women’s involvement in jazz during the 1980s with Diva and Maiden Voyage, and finally to all the virtuosic footage of women soloists from the last two decades including live concert and rehearsal footage of Jane Ira Bloom, Maria Schneider’s big band, Ingrid Jensen, Esperanza Spalding, Terri Lyne Carrington, Toshiko Akiyoshi, and Patrice Rushen, to name just a few. The sheer diversity of such performers active in so many musical epochs lays claim to women’s enduring and persistent presence in the history of American jazz.

A second important contribution of the film is the explicit sociological and cultural presentation of women’s presence in a radically changing jazz world, one now spanning nearly a century. For example, discussions of the discourse surrounding women in the 1970s during the second wave of feminism underscore the changing attitudes directed at female musicians in live music settings. Other jazz documentaries have primarily focused upon particular groups or soloists, or upon particular genres and instrument types, but none of these filmmakers have both had the historical breadth and access to a growing digital archive of material that exists in this film.

Yet there are a few shortcomings even in this ambitious project. For example, most jazz histories fail to document or admit the consistent presence of women in jazz since its inception and explosion during the Jazz Age of the 1920s (often times coinciding with new musical performance aesthetics presented in the nationally popular vaudeville circuits). Yet this may have been the most critical period for the changing roles of women in not only jazz and popular culture, but with regards to women’s increasing freedoms in the public sphere. For it was the 1920s, the so-called Jazz Age, where women’s roles were increasingly debated in public discourses from women’s voting rights, to their changing relation to marriage and work, to their role as entertainers in an era profoundly preoccupied with debating and resisting women’s growing independence. Within the emerging popular entertainment complex, the film and recording industry sought to synergistically promote rising musical stars. During the 1920s, the all-girl vaudeville style jazz band The Ingenues was the most important rival to Paul Whiteman’s orchestra, and this group was well known not only in the U.S., but also abroad. Yet few enthusiasts of jazz history know of this group’s international fame and national status. Part of their fame arose from the many audiovisual documents produced of the group, by the new synchronized sound film companies as Paramount. Further, The Ingenues were frequently written about in the press and newspapers, and were invited to make films for the dominant New York and Hollywood studios. This is only one example of how jazz women may have been highly active during particular periods, yet because of our dependence upon particular jazz media (such as recordings over films) as well as a particular set of artistic criteria, the full history appears, even in this documentary, unaware of this paramount
moment in the music’s development. Of course, there were famous Black bands and performers active during the Jazz Age touring the TOBA circuits such as Lil Hardin’s all-girl band, yet entrenched racism meant that the most visible and expensive technologies were largely reserved for White all-girl bands, as well as a few female urban blues singers (Bessie Smith). Since the eruption of gender and cultural studies during the 1980s, scholars including Antoinette D. Handy, Rosetta Reitz, Angela Davis, Sally Placksin, and Linda Dahl were fully aware of this critical junction for women in jazz, as were many of the musicians interviewed in the documentary, including Peggy Gilbert, who was very active during the 1920s as a saxophonist on the nationally organized vaudeville circuits. In one interview (and in reference to the 1920s) she states directly “I had many wonderful women musicians to work with, the place was loaded with them.” To these few utterances of important surviving players, arises the challenge of better historicizing these germinal periods.

“You Play Well for a Girl”

Hopefully, it is a well-established concept in jazz’s historiography that women faced extreme sexism during their professional lives, but hearing the individual stories of these musicians reminds us of how unusual and bizarre—and ultimately painful—these gendered experiences could be. Some relived them with great aplomb and humor, such as bassist Nedra Wheeler, who comically re-enacted the experience of being told by a toothless, aged club owner that her pay would be cut because he hadn’t known she was a woman when he hired the band. Other stories revealed the more damaging “unspoken” rule that women would not be hired for a male band, such as leading soloist Billie Rogers, who was briefly hired for a band, only to be immediately fired after the men conspired to have her removed from their otherwise all-male group. Clora Bryant tells of how the public’s racist outcry at her appearances in a local LA television program during 1951 with the Ada Leonard all-girl band led to the station to drop her from the program. Although seemingly less severe were the informal daily taunts and patronizing remarks in the gender liberated decades of the 1980s and 1990s in New York jam sessions, such as those directed at jazz drummer Sherrie Miracle. Common taunts such as “take your shirt off” or “can you handle this tempo honey” spurred her on, but simultaneously instilled a rage, which motivated her to perfect her talents.

Other women talked more generally about the near impossibility of receiving the credit and press coverage they deserved for their unique playing, recordings, compositions, and band-leading contributions. Melba Liston went so far as to give up her professional career of performing, arranging, and composing for a time, after years of working for male bands in New York. Some might argue that the expatriation of

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some prominent women instrumentalists to Paris or London, including Hazel Scott and Mary Lou Williams, was motivated by an overwhelming struggle and subsequent disappointment at failing to acquire the same accolades fashioned upon their sometimes inferior male peers. Both Williams and Scott would experience depression, economic hardship, and profound existential crisis with regards to their role in the jazz world during the 1940s, 50s and beyond.

Ultimately, I understand Chaikin’s aesthetic/historical choice to prioritize these women’s voices, and those of the core engines driving women’s presence in jazz over those of historians and academics. On the other hand, I also wonder if the lack of women scholars speaks to the enduring obstacles still separating women performers from those most passionately and actively engaged in their promotion, representation, and theoretical analysis of larger social ideologies such as sexism and gender constructions with the music industry. At the very end of the documentary, as one of the last sections of contributors credited, we see the names of a few scholars, including Sherrie Tucker and Cheryl Keyes, but their presence seemed rather minimal. In other words, while male scholars are actively invited, incorporated, and awarded for engaging with the professional jazz world through appearances in globally circulated audiovisual media, few women scholars acquire a mediated presence in such mainstream canonical work. Moreover, the tokenism agenda so long driving the manner in which women instrumentalists were featured in jazz contexts seems to linger in the world of jazz scholarship, where often the producers of general jazz scholarship, conferences, books, and now documentaries fail to consult women scholars, or if they do, minimally prioritize one or two “women in jazz” scholar/s who manage to sit in for the rest of us, even as they cogently argue against this process in their own work. Sherrie Tucker’s insightful 2004 essay “Bordering on Community: Improvising Women Improvising Women-in-Jazz” points to the paradoxical reflections of and conditions surrounding women jazz musicians targeted to represent all women in jazz or invited to perform in so-called ghettoizing contexts highlighting only women. Yet these dynamics play out in other vehicles such as valorization, publishing, and consultation work in the name of professional service. The excellent film Twenty Feet From Stardom, featuring some of the most prolific female back-up singers from the 1960s to the present, similarly and ironically positioned the sexism and patriarchal system of the music industry as inhibitors of these women’s public canonization, yet those

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5For more cultural, musicological, and historical context regarding jazz women’s changing presence in the American entertainment industry in the first half of the twentieth century see Sherrie Tucker’s Swing Shift: All-Girl Bands of the 1940s (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), which concentrates upon the labor, race, and gendered relations guiding women’s musical participation in American culture of that decade. My own book Some Liked It Hot: Jazz Women in Film and Television, 1928–1959 (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2010) also offers contextualization for the growing presence of women in audiovisual media from the 1920s to the 1950s. For related resources on women in audiovisual jazz-related media including an extensive filmography see the book’s accompanying website Jazz Women in Film and Television at http://www.jazzwomenfilmtelevision.com/filmography/.


7Morgan Neville, et. al. Twenty Feet from Stardom (n.p., Gil Fieson Productions, 2013). Film.
women scholars who have labored for years to prioritize and theorize the dynamics of girl groups in the 1960s, especially Jacqueline Warwick in her book *Girl Groups, Girl Culture*,8 languish on the side-lines of these more visible music documentary networks. Without reservation, I recommend this artistically produced, historically comprehensive, and highly entertaining documentary. It deserves a broad reception in both popular and academic settings, where it will undoubtedly enable jazz enthusiasts to admire and recognize the rich experiences and aesthetically rich presence of women in jazz during the twentieth century. Moreover, I hope that this documentary inspires more rigorous and nuanced debate about the invisibility of women in jazz. Most importantly, I hope that this film’s reception leads to a deeper engagement between the worlds of jazz promotion, documentation, and performance, so that the cycle of forgetting can ultimately be replaced by a cycle of remembering, engagement, and inclusive rejuvenation.

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