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Victoria E. Smith

CUNY Lehman College, victoria.smith1@lc.cuny.edu

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LISTEN TO LISTON: EXAMINING THE SYSTEMIC ERASURE OF
BLACK WOMEN IN THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF JAZZ

Victoria E Smith

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Advisor – Professor Naomi Zack, Department of Philosophy

“First you are a jazz musician, then you are black, then you are a female. I mean it goes down the line like that. We’re like the bottom of the heap.” – Melba Liston (Stokes 1983)

When one hears the phrase “women in jazz,” one may think of Billie Holiday, Lena Horne, or Dinah Washington. Less commonly, one might consider pianist and composer Mary Lou Williams. What about bassist Lucille Dixon of the unremembered band the “International Sweethearts of Rhythm?” What of the all-female jazz group “The Darlings of Rhythm,” organized in Harlem in 1943 by a black female saxophonist who was dissatisfied with the “deplorable” working conditions of black female musicians? (Tucker 1998, 261) Composers, trombone players, drummers, and more, the American jazz scene of the mid-twentieth-century would be drastically different without women – yet few people know about them and their accomplishments. The lack of remembrance of women in jazz is further complicated when considering the intersectionality of race and gender. The double discrimination that non-white women, specifically black women, experienced during the twentieth-century is one of the main reasons we know Dizzy Gillespie and Miles Davis, but forget women such as Melba Liston.

Melba Liston collaborated with the likes of Gerald Wilson, Dexter Gordon, Count Basie, and Quincy Jones, just to name a few of her partnerships. One of her longest working relationships was with pianist and composer Randy Weston, with whom she created 10 albums. (Kernodle 2014) The partnership between Weston and Liston, and her other partnerships with Dizzy Gillespie, Mary Lou Williams, and Billie Holiday are lenses through which we can examine the systemic erasure of women’s accomplishments and contributions to jazz. It also serves as a lens through which to examine how stereotypes categorizing black women as catty, or incapable of working together, have deleterious consequences that further marginalize and

minimize the contributions black women have made to jazz culture. The exclusion of women from jazz is a reflection of the gender stereotypes affecting women within our society, and is further complicated by the intersectionality of race and gender for black female jazz artists.

Why Women Are Forgotten

In this essay, I argue that due to the overwhelming societal expectations, gendered language, and physical threats of sexual assault, harassment, and rape, black women had to create alternative spheres of affirmation and musical expression, because jazz culture stymied their access to musical knowledge. Furthermore, the stereotypes associated with black women, such as their inability to work together intelligently, or to have relationships with black men outside of a romantic context, hinders our collective remembrance of women in jazz. I aim to examine these issues using the experiences and musical career of arranger, composer, and trombone player Melba Liston as a point of reference.

The life and careers of many female jazz artists are often left undiscussed in our collective remembrance of jazz. Women like Melba Liston and Mary Lou Williams became directors of international music programs, artists in residence at prestigious universities, and mentors for the next generation of female musicians, (Kernodle 2014, 52) yet they are not nearly as recognized as their male peers. The experiences of Liston and her successful working relationships with other black women and men show that jazz history, though rich and informative, is in many ways lacking and stereotypical. Even in the later part of the twentieth-century, when terms such as “feminism” became part of the American lexicon, there was a racial divide that excluded, and in some ways prevented the social mobility of black women, who were essential to these movements. A new kind of social phenomenon came from this, which

musicology professor Tammy L. Kernodle refers to as the “exceptional black woman,” an extension of the “exceptional woman” trope (which will be discussed in later sections of this thesis). (Kernodle 2014, 52) While the efforts to create festivals, organizations, and musical spaces for women in the latter half of the twentieth-century were laudable, their heavy promotion of white women in leadership positions served as “means through which the exclusion or subordination of contemporary black women musicians could be rationalized.” (Kernodle 2014, 52) The result of this was a solution that mirrored the lives and experiences of Liston, Williams, and the generations of black women before them: creating social movements and organizations *by* black women and *for* black women in an attempt to combat the erasure of black women. The transference of social, musical, and political information between black women was a form of ‘survival’ – a term that is seemingly synonymous with the black female experience in America. Here, I will begin with briefly examining the erasure of black women in bebop, using Mary Lou Williams as an example. I will then discuss how gendered language and societal barriers pertaining to race and gender have negatively impacted the experiences of black women in jazz, using Melba Liston as a lens. Lastly, I will discuss the gender based issues we still have in jazz today.

Forgetting Women - Bebop

A prime example of the erasure of contributions from black women in jazz can be found in the esteemed bebop movement of the early/mid-twentieth-century. Bebop is hailed as a modern art form, and an example of Afro-modernist ideologies that developed during this time period. However, the accolades we bestow and the lens through which we examine this genre is incomplete without recognizing that in many ways, the term “Afro-modernist ideologies” is

really “*male* Afro-modernist ideologies.” Ethnomusicologist Ingrid Monson suggests the term ‘modern,’ “can be used in relation to political and social opposition to racial segregation in the entertainment world.” (Stewart 2011, 335) Using Monson’s statement as a working definition of modern, bebop in many ways fits this profile. Bebop was a musical movement that afforded black artists a sense of autonomy in a racially oppressive musical industry. The swing era of the earlier part of the twentieth-century was rapidly gentrified, and bebop allowed black artists to create a new musical dialogue that was inaccessible to white musicians; it was a direct response to the white supremacist society of the twentieth-century. One of the main reasons the musical dialogue was inaccessible to white musicians was because of where and when bebop music was created.

When discussing bebop and its origins in places like Minton’s Playhouse in Harlem, Kenny Clarke recalled, “We often talked in the afternoon. That’s how we came to write different chord progressions and the like. We did that to discourage the sitters-in at night we didn’t want.” (Stewart 2011, 338) The exclusionary nature of bebop was intentional. Abstraction was used to ensure that the musical language of bebop remained inaccessible. Music educator and percussionist Jesse Stewart notes that, “the processes of abstraction take place within musical idioms. Music can be said to be representational in the sense that musicians generally draw upon certain stylistic conventions that invoke and, in effect, represent a particular musical style or tradition. Over time, musicians experiment with those conventions in response to changing musical and cultural contexts, and the relationship to prior musical codes becomes more abstract.” (Stewart 2011, 336) The musical styles and tradition that bebop artists were referencing were the musical traditions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century, such as Tin-Pan Alley songs. Bebop artists would write new songs based off an amalgamation of chord

structures from pre-existing songs and create new, more complex compositions. The usage of complex chord substitutions shows the interconnected nature of bebop and the black musical lexicon. The structural changes of the music, as well as the shift in instrumentation (e.g. the cymbals taking over the roles of timekeeper as opposed to the bass drum during the swing era) showcased the “abstract” nature of this music. To listeners (i.e. white consumers) this music was foreign, and perhaps nothing more than noise. But to the creators, it was music drawn from rich, black musical traditions and history, and something only artists with the “highest levels of musicianship” could play. (Stewart 2011)

The term “highest level of musicianship” is a loaded phrase, connected to gendered and racialized social norms and cultural expectations. In order for one to be highly skilled in the context of bebop, they had to have access to the spaces and the musicians creating this music outside of regular performance hours. Women, especially black women, did not have access to these performance spaces, which troubles the validity of what the highest level of musicianship really means. As Stewart notes, “Modern jazz provided an arena in which African American men could develop a masculinist ethos of Afrological creativity and genius.” (Stewart 2011, 348) Black men had unparalleled social capital within jazz culture. This social capital, however, was not accessible to black women, and in many ways it perpetuated a culture of misogynoir within bebop. As African American Studies Professor Mark Anthony Neal suggests, the idea that “black women were largely incidental” to bebop creates space for the false narrative that “black men and women simply created alternative spheres of affirmation” voluntarily. (Stewart 2011, 349)

The phrase “incidental” in relation to women’s role in bebop is troubling, considering the contributions black women have made to jazz as a whole - bebop included. For instance, Mary Lou Williams served as a mentor for many of the younger bebop musicians, including

Thelonious Monk, and attended after-hours jam sessions at Minton's Playhouse, a key birthplace of bebop in Harlem. But we still have this question: Were black women really "incidental" in bebop, or simply not remembered due to the male dominated historiography of the jazz genre? (Stewart 2011) Furthermore, we should examine *why* black women created alternative spheres of affirmation. Was it because they wanted to, or because they *had* to? The lack of inclusion and remembrance of women in bebop is an example of how women, particularly black women, are often left out of the jazz narrative as a whole.

Melba Liston – Coded Language and Gender Stereotypes in Jazz Culture

Vocalist Leon Thomas once said the following to Melba Liston: "If you take care of your music, the music will take care of you." (Kaplan 1999, 424 from Barg 2014, 97) The phrase "take care of your music" in the professional sense in jazz culture referred to musical activities and personal qualities historically coded as masculine, such as discipline, autonomy, efficiency, and mastery. However, the phrase "to take care of" also evokes feminine-coded practices and values when referencing female musicians, such as nurturing, selfless devotion, interdependence, and attention to detail. (Barg 2014, 97) As Lisa Barg mentions in her article "Taking Care of Music: Gender, Arranging, and Collaboration in the Weston-Liston Partnership," a term as seemingly innocuous as "taking care of music" is loaded with gendered stereotypes and societal implications. One notable example of the feminization of taking care of music is with regards to how Liston self-cataloged her music and donated it to the Center for Black Music Research before she died. Liston understood that her contributions to jazz music would not be remembered, and if they were, it would not be remembered properly or to the extent of the music of her male counterparts. This very act of self-remembrance and preservation reverses the

antiquated and rather romanticized notions we have about musicians and their authorship, and “troubled the gendered and raced narratives of heroic creation and individualism in jazz.” (Barg 2014, 98). Liston quite literally took care of her music because if she did not, no one else would. This was an issue many black female jazz artists faced.

Many narratives describing the partnership between Liston and Weston, and describing Liston’s collaboration style in general, describe her as “self-effacing,” and having a “quiet persona.” *A New York Times* article describing Liston had a headline reading, “Melba Liston Is Mostly Unseen.” The article then goes on to describe how when Quincy Jones “occasionally brings her forward” to solo, she is billed as “[their] composer-arranger-seamstress,” and “den mother.” Furthermore, when she is on stage, audiences “don’t really expect anything [from her performance].” (Barg, 2014, 100)

The fact that audiences do not “expect anything” from her when Jones “occasionally brings her forward” underscores the gendered power codes of the bandstand that reduced female creativity to novelty and gave men the power to orchestrate the physical and social space of performance. The focus from the audience was not on Liston’s ability as a musician, but rather on the space she takes up on the bandstand and the body with which she takes up space. The phrase “den mother” and “composer-arranger-seamstress” also underscores the gendered language associated with women and jazz performance. A “den mother” is a female maternal figure that is responsible for taking care of and ensuring the wellbeing of people, usually children, that are not her own. This connects back to the idea of taking care of music, which is paralleled to taking care of people. This was something that was often expected of black women, who were seen as “mama,” or “mammy” like figures in twentieth-century America. Calling her a composer, arranger, and then seamstress in that particular order simultaneously acknowledges

her contributions and “others” Liston by subscribing to a gendered aesthetic hierarchy. Feminine labor (seamstress) is subordinate to what is considered an exercise in male creativity (composer), and allows Liston to be seen, but not without the carefully crafted guise of gender norms. (Barg, 2014, 100) Her success and necessary contributions cannot be mentioned without describing her as a maternal figure, and connecting her job to some sort of domesticated roll clearly associated with womanhood, femininity, and gendered stereotypes.

This treatment of Liston is further complicated when examining the role of an arranger and its ambiguity, especially within a jazz music making context. People are not often as familiar with an arranger as they are with the performer or bandleader, which means that arrangers, male or female, were often behind the scenes. However, as seen with the description of Liston in the New York Times article, being behind the scenes as a woman and its mystique does not give women the same creative or intellectual power it gives men; it further solidifies their subordinate position. The public anonymity of arranging correlates to the gender norms expected of women at the time. Women were absolutely essential, but within a hidden realm, away from the public eye, only to be brought out “occasionally” when a man saw fit.

Even when the role of the arranger and their perception in the public eye began to shift in the late 1950s and 1960s, women arrangers were still hidden from the public realm. What was once seen as debasing the creative process of jazz, arranging and arrangers were assigned an “auteur-like figure” status in the mid-twentieth-century. An example of this is the collaboration between Gil Evans and Miles Davis (i.e., the iconic 1957 album, “The Birth of Cool”). As Barg notes, their relationship reached a “canonical status,” whereas the recognition of Liston’s role as arranger in the Weston-Liston partnership “barely registers in the postwar histories of arranging.” Though there are many reasons for Liston’s lack of remembrance in jazz

historiography, “as a black woman arranger working behind the scenes in all-male bands, Liston did not have the same access to circuits of public power and prestige that would have enabled her to inhabit the role of auteur arranger and thus become a visible figure of influence in (and for) jazz history.” Social networks and the power they came with were essential to the success of jazz. However, these homosocial networks were exclusionary towards women, forcing black women to do something they were already well acquainted with: create their own social networks. (Barg, 2014, 101)

The Homosociality of Jazz Networks

Social networks were essential to the culture of jazz, as it enabled jazz musicians to hone their skills, find their musical voice, and sense of community. This network, however, was not accessible to women in the twentieth-century and its homosociality was exclusionary towards women. Dizzy Gillespie has described the jam session environment as “seedbeds for [jazz musicians’] new, modern style of music,” and stated that male musicians “had to be sensitive to each other as brothers in order to express [themselves] completely, maintain [their] individuality, [and] play as one.” (Kernodle 2014, 32) The use of the terms “seedbed” and “brotherhood” evokes masculine qualities. This insinuates that the jam session environment was essential for the development of male musicians, and although women were not outright excluded, they were not exactly welcomed. Clara Bryant, a black female trumpeter during the mid-twentieth-century, once said, “A woman would rarely venture into a club unaccompanied... Women instrumentalists, no matter how well known, steered clear of the jam sessions. Women who did venture into the performing arena found the range of opportunities limited.” (Dje Dje and Meadows 1998, 285, from Kernodle 2014, 32) The limitations could include anything from not

being invited to the bandstand to perform, to facing sexual harassment and lewd remarks from their male counterparts. Bryant's statement demonstrates how it was common knowledge that female jazz musicians were excluded from the community, and consequently the musical information and social capital that was disseminated during these sessions.

Since women did not have access to the homosocial networks of jam sessions, they had to create find alternative ways to get musical information and access to the ideas men practiced during after-hours jam sessions by creating "grassroots networks that enable the transfer of knowledge." (Kernodle 2014, 32) Black women could not rely on "the protection that white skin, maleness and wealth confer," and as a result created their own networks from social arenas they already had access to: the church, home, and community (Kernodle 2014, 33)

Social Networks for Black Women – Church, Home, and Community

The church has historically provided a space for women to play their music publically within the societal constraints placed upon them in a puritanical, Western, Christian society. Women performing music in the church subverted the roles of traditional masculinity in the church by giving women a voice in the form of choir, piano, and other forms of musical expression within a music ministry. This provided both a formal and informal social network for black women, and was often one of the first experiences female jazz musicians had same-gender collaborations. Liston credits her church upbringing for "framing her earliest contexts of music making and in the development of the consciousness of her female relatives, [and] being key to her understanding of how important music was in defining the black experience." (Kernodle 2014, 33)

The home served as an informal setting where many black women were exposed to music via radio, jazz records, and in some households, piano. Music listening was often a family experience, and something that was shared. According to an interview conducted with Liston, “One of Liston’s earliest memories of performing in the home was playing “Deep River” and “Rocking the Cradle of the Deep” while sitting on the back porch with her grandfather (Liston 1996, 4). Hearing, and in some cases seeing or playing, this music in the home gave an important historical and performative knowledge of jazz, which would be foundational to the understanding many black women had of this genre. Hearing these songs allowed some women, such as Liston, to replicate the songs they heard on their own instruments, which would aid in their foundational understanding to the structure and creating of jazz music.

The community was another essential social network for black female jazz musicians. An example of this is a school music program, such as the one Liston enrolled in in 1937, after her family relocated to Los Angeles. Liston became a part of Alma Julia Hightower’s Work Projects Administration (WPA) children’s band. Hightower was a black female vocalist, drummer, and music teacher who taught hundreds of musicians during her music career in the early to mid-twentieth-century. Liston recalled that, “the young musicians [in Hightower’s program] received a full range of training that included tap and hula dancing, singing lessons, theory, and basic musicianship.” (Kerndnodle 2014, 34) It was here that Liston not only honed her music skills and began to find her musical voice, but was exposed to other black women who played, taught and wrote music. This was a foundational experience for Liston and an example of a social network she had access to as a young woman, that many other female musicians did not and could not have had access to. In some ways, this shielded Liston from many of the racial and gender based issues that derailed her black female counterparts as young musicians. The

community acted as an insulation for Liston and presumably other black female musicians, which demonstrates how black women create spaces for themselves to learn and grow, regardless of the networks in place that systemically exclude them.

Experiences of Women Outside of their Social Networks

Eventually Liston grew older, moved away from Los Angeles, and began to play and arrange for ensembles throughout the country. Her technical training, expertise in writing, and reputation did not spare her from the misogyny outside of Hightower's WPA children's band. Women like Liston who entered into jazz's homosocial networks were still faced with the burden of proving their worth because her gender and race put her in the category of "lesser than." A prime example of this is when Liston toured with Dizzy Gillespie's band in 1956. Often referenced as "Gillespie's State Department Band," this ensemble was one of the first American jazz groups to tour Europe, the Middle East, and South America as part of the Eisenhower administration's strategy to use the mass mediation of American music to combat communism. When Liston arrived to New York to join the band, she recalls some male counterparts exclaimed, "Why the hell did [Gillespie] send all the way to California for a bitch trombone player?" Reportedly, after she played her arrangements, the men said "Mama's alright," now referencing Liston as "mama" instead of "bitch." The term "mama" is nuanced and carries a racially charged history. Kernodle writes, "While the term 'mama' is often used to acknowledge the strength, power, and nurturance of black women, in this case the use of 'mama' is duplicitous. It is an acknowledgement of Liston's strength as musician, yet it is also reflective of her willingness to take on certain domestic needs of the band." (Kernodle 2014, 35) "Mama" becomes a term that is associated with the domestic role many black women take on, as they

wind up being of service to the men around them. Liston did more than arrange music for her male band members; she cut their hair, sewed buttons, and did laundry while they toured. These actions show that the usage of the phrase “mama” is similar to the term “den mother” Quincy Jones would go on to describe her with in 1961, and that the role of a woman in the highly gendered arena of jazz was multifaceted.

Black Women Working Together

The asexual term of “mama” is also in juxtaposition to the overly sexualized “Jezebel” label black women are assigned. An example of this contrast is the working relationship between Melba Liston and Billie Holiday. Liston and Holiday were on tour together in the summer of 1950, which was the beginning of a friendship that lasted until Holiday’s death in 1959. Their relationship was similar to that of a mother and daughter, which is not uncommon for working relationships between black women. Holiday would impart wisdom about her experiences with drugs and sexual harassment on the road, and Liston was responsible for keeping her sober during tour and “keep[ing] an eye on [Holiday]” in turn. This was important, because “like many black mothers, [Holiday] understood that if Liston accepted the sexual politics and role of “mammy” that would be offered to her by the social constructs of the cultural industry, she would become a willing participant to [...] subordination.” (Kernodle 2014, 39) Holiday imparted this knowledge to Liston, because she experienced firsthand how the music industry commodified black female bodies and did not want her to experience the same thing. This is yet another example of how black women created their own social networks for each other, and imparted not just musical wisdom, but social and political wisdom they need to survive. The

relationship between Liston and Holiday is a small example of how black women debunk the negative stereotype that they are incapable of working together in a non-competitive fashion.

Black women being pitted against each other is a prevalent trope within not only within our modern society but within the historiography and remembrance of women in jazz, as well. Kernodle writes, “The narrative of the competitive personality [and] the inability to “get along” among black women [...] have shaped the public understandings of the culture of jazz. It is often used as one of the rationales for why women are “disruptive” to the work being done in spaces where jazz is created [...] The male competitive spirit in jazz, however, is the essence of the creative energy generated. It is ‘the’ necessary constant [...]” (Kernodle 2014, 28) Essentially, female competition is seen as “disruptive,” whereas male competition is lauded and deemed a “necessary constant” in jazz. This contrast shows how the creative and competitive spirit which encourages male musicians is subverted to oppress female creativity and expression, making space for female creative voices limited and therefore coveted.

This phenomenon has often given rise to the idea of the “exceptional woman,” which “becomes the rationale for the exclusion of other women and lends support to a narrative of invisibility that occurs in jazz histories as it relates to other women musicians.” (Kernodle 2014, 29) The narrative of the “exceptional woman” has contributed to another phenomenon of “gendered isolation,” the idea that collaboration of many exceptional women only happened with their male peers or their husbands, and not with other women. That male-centered ideology supports the patriarchal notion that women cannot be creative or expressive without the guidance, or in some cases the permission, of men. This oppressive ideology perpetuates the narrative that men and women cannot work together without there being a formal (i.e. marriage) or closely linked relationship.

A key example that debunks the myth of the exceptional women and gendered isolation is the relationship between Dizzy Gillespie, Melba Liston, and Mary Lou Williams. Williams and Liston supposedly (“supposedly,” because both women lived and worked in Harlem in the 1950s, so it is possible they met beforehand) met in 1957 via the introduction of Gillespie. The women performed together at the Newport Jazz Festival after Williams’s self-imposed three-year hiatus, which was the beginning of a working relationship that lasted for the better part of a decade. Both of these women worked with Dizzy Gillespie independently before meeting, which is important to note because “[Liston and Williams’ relationship] refutes the commonly held notion that black women are incapable of forming emotional/professional relationships due to their chronically competitive personalities, especially when black men are also engaged in these scenarios.” (Kernodle 2014, 31)

Williams met Gillespie in the early 1940s, when she moved to New York City. Williams often met Gillespie at Minton’s Playhouse in Harlem, a couple of blocks away from where she lived. Gillespie helped Williams land some performance opportunities because she had trouble finding work, other than subpar, non-union jobs. Gillespie was able to help her secure a coveted union job, and transition into the New York City jazz scene as a respected arranger and pianist. Liston met Gillespie in the late 1940s after her move to Harlem due to the disbanding of Gerald Wilson’s band. Gillespie heard that Liston was in town, so he fired his trombone player, whom he allegedly wanted to get rid of anyway, and hired her on the spot when she came to see his band perform. Liston joined Gillespie’s band months before they too disbanded, playing with John Coltrane, Jimmy Heath and John Lewis. (Kernodle 2014, 40)

Gillespie understood his social capital as one of the leading faces of the modern jazz movement, and he was able to use his power and social access to help advance the careers of two

women who, although were already well known respected soloists and arrangers in their own right, benefited from the backing of a well-respected black man. In 1949, Williams composed the song “In the Land of Oo Bla Dee” for Gillespie’s band, which became a staple for the group’s repertoire in the 1950s. In 1956, Liston was selected by Gillespie to be a trombone player for his State Department Band. Gillespie asked Liston to compose/arrange some tunes for the band instead of performing, because he knew that an impressive solo would not earn her the respect she deserved from men in the ensemble who referred to her as a “bitch trombone player.” As mentioned in a previous section of this essay, arrangers had achieved a previously unheard of canonical status in the mid twentieth-century. Gillespie was aware of the social dynamics at play when he asked Liston to join his band, and prepared her for scrutiny from men by asking her to compose - something that was associated with male intellect and power in the jazz scene. By doing this, Gillespie allowed Liston to “take care of her music” in a non-traditionally female sense, and earn her place in highly public, world-renowned, and male dominated space.

Around the same time, Mary Lou Williams embarked on a two-year tour in Europe after achieving recognition as a modern jazz and bebop arranger/composer/pianist on a global scale. Williams returned to the United States in 1954 after experiencing mental and physical exhaustion. Williams renounced performing and converted to Catholicism, prompting Gillespie to try and convince Williams to start performing again (to no avail). That is when Gillespie called upon Liston to check on Williams in 1957, which is allegedly the start of their relationship. Until this time, both women had been working with Gillespie, but apart from each other. In an interview with Williams, Williams mentioned that Liston’s appreciation for her piano chords and arrangement ideas eventually encouraged her to start composing and performing again. Williams recalled,

“Dizzy would send Melba. “Go up there and see what Lou’s doing. See how she’s playing.” Melba, I understand, would go back and say, “Man, Lou played some chords and you ought to hear them. They’re really great.” He said, “well, get her out.” Melba would come here and when he took me out to the Newport Jazz Festival, Melba arranged some things. He said, “Those arrangements were really good.” She said, “I didn’t do them. That was Lou’s arrangement and I just sat down and took the music down.” He said, “What! Get her out here!”” (Williams 1973, 149) (Kernodle 2014, 42)

This exchange demonstrates a collaboration between two black female musicians that is not based in malice, competition, or spite over a man. The relationship between Liston and Williams was *because* of Gillespie, but not *about* Gillespie. The relationship was centered on creating innovative, modern jazz music, and “[their] collective desire to redefine the persona of the black jazz musician from the common reading of the “other” to that of an artist.” (Kernodle 2014, 40) Their partnership was based in common musical interests, expression, and artistic collaboration that would lead to Williams and Liston composing and arranging together for years to come. It is also important to note that Gillespie understood that Liston would be able to connect with Williams better than to him and his wife, Lorraine. Liston and Williams were both black women in a highly male centric and oppressive musical genre. This is an example of two black women supporting each other musically and emotionally and not fighting to be a singular “exceptional woman,” but rather exceptional women together. It is also an example of the importance of visibility and representation in jazz spaces; Gillespie, although black, was not able to make Williams comfortable enough to return to playing. Liston was able to relate to Williams on a deeper level, and it was that connection and subsequent visibility that helped Williams’ return to music.

Sexual Harassment, Assault and Race

The support system of black women was invaluable, but not impenetrable. The sexualization and objectification of women in jazz culture is further complicated when looking at the intersectionality of race and gender, and how white women's status in society affected their experiences compared to their black female counterparts. Melba Liston was sexually harassed, assaulted, and raped, throughout her musical career. During her 1992 interview with Steve Isoardi in conjunction with the UCLA Oral History Program at the UCLA Library, Liston is uncharacteristically forthcoming with her experiences as the only woman traveling with all male bands. The otherwise jovial nature of the interview quickly turned somber, and it was clear that the topic of gender in Gerald Wilson's band made Liston uncomfortable. In their essay about Liston's interview, Monica Hairston O'Connell and Sherrie Tucker note, "By the time Liston addresses unwanted sexual attention from men, she has already deflected several questions from Isoardi about her experience of being the only woman in men's bands." (O'Connell and Tucker 2014, 142) Liston's exchange with Isoardi about rape is as follows:

"Any trouble on the road with them, the guys, I mean?" Isoardi's tone is conversational.

Liston affirms, "Yeah, yeah."

Isoardi laughs heartily apparently anticipating something other than what comes next.

"All of that," continues Liston.

"What kind of trouble?" asks Isoardi.

Liston's response is immediate and direct: "Rapes and everything."

"*That* kind of stuff?" The interviewer responds quickly, adding, perhaps too hopefully, a clarification that this did not come "from the band itself."

But Liston's reply affirms that it did.

There is a long silence—this time from the interviewer. He sighs.

Liston, on the other hand, is direct, matter-of-fact. "So that's that."

Isoardi finally ends his silence with a grave observation, "Whoah, hard dues." [Liston] retorts, "I've been going through that stuff for all my life." It is as though this is obvious and should not have to be explained. The interviewer is speechless. He tries, in several starts, to frame a question about what would she do "when stuff like that would happen," did she, for example tell the bandleader?

Liston's devastating reply: "Go to the doctor."

Isoardi implores her for other things she could have done, people she could have talked to.

Liston continues, "Go to the doctor and tell him, and that was that."

Isoardi's sadness and shock is now clashing with her direct address. "Nothing else you could do?" (O'Connell and Tucker 2014, 142-143)

Liston's seemingly blasé recalling of these interactions is multilayered. Referring to rape from male band members as "hard dues" normalizes the sexual abuse women were subjected to in homosocial and male centric jazz culture. This was something Liston expected to face as the only woman in such a space. "Going to the doctor" instead of going to the bandleader is also telling. Being outside of the social networks of the church, home, or community made Liston more vulnerable than her male counterparts. She could not go to her band leaders (plural because she later states this happened in Gillespie's band as well) because that would make her even more subject to harassment. Going against a well-defined male power structure, especially as a

black woman mid-twentieth-century, was virtually impossible and speaking up against her abusers could very easily render her jobless, or worse.

The exchange between Liston and Isoardi also alludes to the concept of the “culture of dissemblance,” as mentioned by African-American women’s history expert, Darlene Clark Hine. Hine writes, “By dissemblance I mean the behavior and attitudes of black women that created the appearance of openness and disclosure but actually shielded the truth of their inner lives and selves from their oppressors.” (O’Connell and Tucker from Hine 1997, 37) Liston demonstrates the culture of dissemblance by appearing open about discussing continuous rape throughout her jazz career, and laughing throughout the interview. The lilt of her voice might make it seem as if this is simply a story from her past, but it is really an example of unprocessed trauma which was the norm for black female jazz musicians, and black women in general. Appearing open about a topic as traumatic as sexual harassment, rape, and gender discrimination is a reflection of the social atmosphere in which Liston was an artist and an example of survival techniques. Liston lacked the social capital to dismantle the oppressive system in which she had to create music, yet she made unparalleled contributions to the jazz world while experiencing intense misogyny.

The experiences Liston faced during her stints with these bands provided a wellspring of first hand experiences about the nuances of gender and race and how black female bodies disrupted the social norms of jazz creation spaces. Kernodle notes, “Like many of her peers, Liston learned that life on the road as the only woman encouraged the development of various types of “knowing” that was based in how you engaged with men in those spaces. These forms of knowledge reveal 1) the vulnerability of the black female body; 2) the devaluation of the black female body within certain cultural/social spheres; 3) how the presence of the female body in male-centered spaces could be read as promoting a type of sexual currency that disrupted the

power/social relationships among men.” (Kernodle 2014, 34) Women like Liston were seen as robbing black men of their professional opportunities (i.e. Liston’s participation in the State Department Band) which alludes to the dichotomy of black female womanhood. Black women were simultaneously powerful enough to “rob” black men of their professional opportunities, but insignificant enough to expect rape and assault whilst participating in male centric jazz culture. It is important to note that this experience was unique to black women, because white women were seen as essential to the ethos of jazz culture, but in an ornamental and non-threatening way.

White women’s place in modern jazz history can often be described as that of a “groupie, lover, patron, or wife.” (Kernodle 2014, 36) Dizzy Gillespie discusses the positionality of white women in jazz culture in his 1979 memoir “To Be or Not to Bop.” Gillespie writes, “There’s almost nothing, if a white woman sees it’s to her advantage that she won’t do because she’s been taught that the world is hers to do with, as she wants She’ll be there on the job, every night, sitting there supporting her own goodies As a patron of arts in this society, the white woman’s role, since white males have been so preoccupied with making money, brought her into close contact with modern jazz musicians and created relationships that were often very helpful to the growth of our art.” (Gillespie and Shipton 1979, 282 from Kernodle 2014, 36) This shows the double exclusion black women faced in the jazz scene. Black women did not have the social capital or status that white women held that made them seem non-threatening to the male centric spaces of jazz. They had a clearly defined, and often seemingly ornamental role, which made them “safer” than black women. Black women like Liston who contributed to creating music were not only seen as disrupting the music creation process, but were also guilty of stepping outside of the clearly drawn gendered and racial lines that dominated twentieth-century Western culture by doing so.

CONCLUSION

“Some people would say, ‘well, there just weren’t enough women around.’ But what we have to look at is the machinery – social, economic, political – that didn’t allow those voices to flourish.” – Gina Dent (Youtube 2018)

Women made invaluable contributions to jazz in the mid twentieth-century, and continue to make great and important contributions to jazz today. The women of the mid twentieth-century are often forgotten due to the overtly male-centric culture of jazz, to the detriment of our collective remembrance. Jazz history has the potential to be far more vibrant, inclusive, and rich, but we must remember and acknowledge women and the societal woes that affect their ability to perform to their greatest potential. The professional and personal experiences of Melba Liston recounted in this essay serve as a lens through which we can see not only what black women have done, but what has been done to black women in jazz culture. As Kernodle puts it, “These experiences not only speak to the type of relationships that developed between these women but also reveal how these women created opportunities that validated their presence in certain spaces and developed systems that promoted the transference of knowledge to one another, insuring their mental and physical survival in the environments and scenarios they functioned in.” (Kernodle 2014, 53)

Though prospects for women have improved since the time of Liston and Williams, jazz culture is far from being inclusive. The award winning movies *Whiplash* (2014) and *La La Land* (2016) are great examples of the absence of women in jazz today. Though fictional movies, both films offer their viewers a glimpse into modern day jazz culture: jazz as a form of self-expression

and a nostalgic genre (*La La Land*) and as the picture of competitive drive and hyper masculinity (*Whiplash*). With the exception of a trio of background singers during a performance there are no female jazz performers in *La La Land*. *Whiplash* has one memorable woman character, the first chair alto saxophone player. The antagonist of the movie, the controversial Fletcher Henderson, says to her during rehearsal, “Well, you’re in the first chair, let’s see if it’s just because you’re cute.” After she misses her entrance by one beat, he cuts her off, saying, “Yep, that’s why.” Fletcher’s character is known for his problematic comments and actions throughout the movie. However, what makes this scene particularly poignant is the nature of his insult. In her 2017 essay “The Absent Women of Jazz,” Professor Kelsey Klotz notes, “Fletcher’s slight, which relegates the saxophonist to an aesthetic judgement based on her looks, rather than her musical ability, recalls long-held gender-based stereotypes in jazz that suggest that women’s ability to perform a musical instrument, particularly one other than the piano, is unnatural.” (Klotz 2017)

Klotz goes on to mention that the issue is not necessarily the lack of women *La La Land* and *Whiplash*, but rather the ease with which there is a lack of women. The bands are “unquestionably all-male,” which is similar to jazz history textbooks with the exception of the “exceptional woman,” as I mentioned earlier. Despite women’s active participation in jazz, they are consistently left out of jazz history, which is indicative of a constant dominant gender ideology within the genre rather than the coincidental omission of women throughout history.

Even when girls and women do participate in jazz, they are often subjected to slights about their gender that their male counterparts simply do not experience. Klotz’s recalling of gendered comments throughout her adolescence as a trumpeter are shockingly similar to my experiences as a female percussionist. Like Klotz, I took up my instrument around the age of ten with no inclination that my instrument was “for men.” I was made aware of this less than one week after

I started when my grandfather told me that “drums were for boys.” This was further exacerbated when I asked my percussion teacher for women drummers to watch on Youtube, to which he responded “I don’t know, Sheila E?” Later in the article Klotz describes her experiences in jazz competitions throughout high school from 2004-2006. She received comments from judges and audience members, such as “Who knew a girl could play like that?” (Klotz 2017) I heard similar comments from well-intentioned parents, teachers, and professional musicians at jazz and percussion concerts throughout my adolescence. When I competed in the Berklee High School Jazz Festival in 2016, I was the only girl in my ensemble. When I won the Judge’s Choice Award for my drum solo (inspired by *Whiplash*, ironically), my ensemble’s piano player quipped, “it’s because you’re the only girl” before we had even left the stage.

To reference the quote at the beginning of this section, it is not enough to say “well, there just weren’t any women around” when discussing jazz history. Women have been and continue to be active participants in jazz; we must examine the societal norms and constraints that prevent women from being seen as equally as their male counterparts. By re-evaluating why women are left out of jazz history and responding accordingly, perhaps women like Melba Liston can be central figures within jazz education instead of footnotes in a research paper.

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