

Book Review

Jazzwomen: Conversations with Twenty-One Musicians

Wayne Enstice and Janis Stockhouse
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In *Jazzwomen*, Wayne Enstice and Janis Stockhouse have assembled a colourful collage of perspectives, opinions, and anecdotes from a diverse selection of musicians, ranging widely across racial, national, and socio-economic boundaries. Their interviewees include women from the United States, Canada, Great Britain, and Germany and encompass both those who had the privilege of stable, and often musical, families and those who struggled through great poverty, illness, and discrimination (both gender and racial) as children and adults. This book also provides the reader with a wide number of musical perspectives, containing, in addition to several vocalists and pianists, interviews with two trumpet players, two saxophonists, two drummers, two Hammond B3 organists, a jazz violinist, and a composer/arranger.

Enstice and Stockhouse, through their interviewing and editorial practices, prove to be engaging storytellers. Taking advantage of the broad swath of life experiences presented to them, they encourage their subjects to discuss their artistic philosophies and to share some of the amusing and often bizarre occurrences that seem to characterize life as a musician, thus providing for readers a more nuanced portrait than would have been afforded by a simple polemic against the state of women in jazz.

On the subject of the amusing and bizarre, I think my favourite anecdote is one related by saxophonist Virginia Mayhew. She describes an incident involving pianist Jaki Byard when she was taking his class at the New School for Social Research in New York. While Byard was soloing, Mayhew was softly practicing something on her horn. Byard abruptly slammed down the piano and pulled out a fourteen-inch machete: "He glares at us all and says, 'Who's playing!?!' Everybody's petrified. He said, 'Don't play while I'm playing my solo, God damn it'" (216). Mayhew only now confesses to being the offending party, "when he's safely in his grave" (216).

Regarding artistic philosophy, Enstice and Stockhouse engage in some very intelligent and probing dialogue with their subjects, many of whom express thoughtful insights into the nature of musical improvisation and display a tenacious determination for challenging the boundaries of their improvisational practice. Trumpeter Ingrid Jensen states that her mission is "to make sure that everything I'm playing is something that comes from deep inside, and there's not a lick or a pattern that I practiced. I find myself completely disappointed when I have to rely on things that I know" (160), while vocalist Sheila Jordan rather audaciously states, "Well, I don't care about an audience. I know they pay the way and they help make it happen, but I think my creativity has to come first" (174).

This dialogue also often reveals significant instrumentally-specific ideas about musical improvisation. Drummer Terri Lyne Carrington speaks about how, as a member of the rhythm section, she mostly has to eschew the traditional "showboating" of a soloist, yet is able to be equally creative in her role: "I have always wanted to blend and be a part of the whole. That is stronger to me. Let me add, however, that with quality interactive playing, I am using the same skills as when soloing. It's kind of like soloing with, or at the same time as, the soloist" (58). Composer/arranger Maria Schneider similarly discusses her subtle approach to writing music for improvising musicians, in contrast to typical big band music: "I just don't think in terms of 'one of these boys' when I'm writing chords. I'm thinking of them as sonorities; I'm thinkin' about, 'Ooh, how does this feel, where's it gonna go,' you know, 'what's the tension?' It's a much more inside kind of feeling as opposed to impact: 'Ooh, that's solid'" (274).

When the discussion does turn to issues of gender discrimination in jazz, opinions remain conflicting and diverse. Several musicians confront the treatment of women musicians in jazz, with male agents and producers bearing the bulk of the criticism rather than male musicians. Saxophonist Jane Ira Bloom gives a particularly powerful critique of the sexism "in the covert language of what femininity is," describing how

many critics unknowingly employ “denigrating covert references to women” (11) that form an insidious part of the vocabulary of jazz criticism.

Others, however, are more supportive of the predominance of men in jazz. Trumpeter Clora Bryant says, “I don’t know of any female that’s been an innovator” (39), while vocalist Abbey Lincoln, in one of the most memorable and controversial moments in the book, earnestly defends the role of the black man in jazz: “Women are made to bring children here! She brings the human being, imbues it with her spirit and everything. He builds the outside world, and she makes the people . . . nobody’s trying to play like Hazel Scott. Nobody’s trying to play like Mary Lou Williams. They were wonderful and famous, but nobody is trying to play like any of them. They’re not the rivers. The men are the ones. The rivers are Thelonious Monk, Bud Powell—these are the ones that people are trying to play like” (208).

The one instance of concord lies in a universal disdain for all-women jazz bands, a concept that Jensen refers to as a “freak show” (157). Many of the interviewees articulate their frustration with being displayed as novelty acts, and all are united in the opinion that “jazzwomen” should first and foremost be regarded as artists and musicians. As Schneider states, “if mentorship is truly important, it’s important for young girls to see women working with no special fuss about them” (276).

Accompanying this book is an audio CD containing ten selections performed and composed by some of the women interviewed here. These tracks display impressive musicianship and creativity across a wide spectrum of musical styles and do more to emphasize the extraordinary talent of these musicians than any interview ever could. One track in particular merits the special attention of the listener. “Knee Deep in the Blues” was recorded by vocalist Teri Thornton less than four months before she passed away from cancer and constitutes an amazing expression of courage and fortitude in the face of illness and death.

In reading the biographies that precede each interview in *Jazzwomen*, I was particularly struck by the many significant musical associations and collaborations that these women have had with iconic jazz figures such as Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, Anthony Braxton, Art Blakey, Benny Goodman, Stan Getz, and Charles Mingus. Through the weight of the evidence presented to the reader, rather than through any rhetorical strategies or sociological debates, Enstice and Stockhouse reveal that the main problem in the public perception of women in jazz is not a resistance to their potential future roles, but a failure to recognize the profound impact that these musicians have already had on the genre.