

Book Review

Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies

Nichole T. Rustin and Sherrie Tucker, Editors
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In recent years the work on jazz historiography and criticism has included more and more productive reevaluations of standard historical narratives. *Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies* represents a very necessary addition to this ever expanding scholarship. Central to the importance of this work is the emphasis that editors Nichole T. Rustin and Sherrie Tucker place on not only the role of women in jazz and the uncovering of women's histories in jazz, but also a much needed critical approach to gender issues in jazz. In other words, this collection of essays is not essentially about finding and recuperating women's presence in jazz (although this is a worthy and necessary part of jazz studies). Instead, as the subtitle suggests, *Big Ears* is a (re)examination of the socially and culturally constructed and embedded aspects of *gender* in jazz. Rustin and Tucker express this distinction in the introduction:

Although this is not intended as a women-and-jazz anthology, our focus on gender analysis yields a proliferation of works concerned with women as jazz subjects. It is important to note that we allow this imbalance not in an attempt to "add women" into existing scholarship, but because of the ways these studies demonstrate how gender analysis helps to "listen differently" to areas of jazz culture that are otherwise too easily dismissed as "outside." (2)

Such "listening differently to jazz culture" can be read (and heard) throughout the essays within *Big Ears*, as the contributing authors provide widely differing approaches—methodologically, historically, theoretically, and musically—to listening for gender in jazz. This diversity of approaches adds to the significance and importance of this volume.

The collection opens with an introduction by the co-editors that situates the essays within the cultural and historical context of jazz studies, and provides an in-depth and engaging literature review focused around women and gender studies in jazz. Rustin and Tucker recap a number of important moments in jazz-gender historiography, including: 1) the emphasis on origins that has been a major focus of jazz historiography, and how gender is included or excluded within jazz origin narratives; 2) an emphasis on the "recovery" of women's voices within jazz (especially in the work of feminist scholars in the 1970s and 1980s including Dahl, Placksin, and Handy, among others); 3) the impact of Susan McClary's work on music scholarship in general, and on jazz studies in particular; 4) a growing interest in masculinity studies and jazz (this includes the work of Kelley, Monson, and Gray); and 5) the interconnection of jazz, race, and modernism.

In compiling *Big Ears* the editors have accomplished something I find lacking in some edited volumes of scholarly research: a cohesive and thoughtful organization to the essays. Because of this, the essays that come earlier in the book seem to anticipate the later chapters in a logical manner. The entire book thus feels more coherent and structured as a result.

The essays are organized into three sections. "Part I: Rooting Gender in Jazz History" focuses on contextualizing gender within jazz historiography. Methodologically, this section ranges from examinations of the historical record (Pellegrinelli), to a close musical analysis of piano accompaniment by two female jazz pianists, Lil Hardin Armstrong and Lovie Austin (Taylor), to a reassessment of World War II and post-WWII era jazz and its connection to gender and nationalism in Britain (Baade), to the cultural "replay" involved in contemporary re-enactment concerts of the Glenn Miller Orchestra (McMullen), to Popular Front politics and the music of Hazel Scott and Mary Lou Williams (Hariston). "Part II: Improvising Gender: Embodiment and Performance" examines how gender is embodied through musical performance and dance. The essays in this section employ a wide range of methodologies from a boldly theoretical exploration of black female dancers as flâneurs (Brown), to a nuanced examination of the gendered aspects of George Russell's Lydian Chromatic Concept (Porter), to the ethnographically rich and focused reading (and listening) of one all-

female improvising group (Smith), to the final two informative essays offering reflexive examinations about being a scholar of jazz and focusing on gender (Tucker and Monson). The final section, "Part III: Reimagining Jazz Representations," tackles aspects of gender in jazz largely outside of the arena of performance or composition. The chapters in this section provide a careful examination of women jazz collectors in post-World War II Germany (Schlicht), a highly detailed music ethnography of Leimart Park in South Central Los Angeles (Vargas), excellent close readings of short stories by Sherley Ann Williams and Toni Cade Bambara depicting women in relationships with jazz musicians (Griffin), an extensive examination of masculinity in the film and novel *A Young Man with a Horn* (Rustin), and a valuable and informed look at "soundie" films—prototypical music videos—by black film directors that included all-women bands, such as the International Sweethearts of Rhythm (McGee).

I will now briefly examine several representative essays that can help us utilize "big ears" for listening to gender in jazz. I focus on the following essays because they reveal the potential methodological avenues available to researchers examining gender in jazz (and music more broadly). How do different methodologies open up new questions? What are the limitations of such methodologies and how can we learn by using multiple methods? These are questions I am examining in my own research and the essays in this volume provide wonderful examples for gender-focused studies that rely on varying methodologies.

The opening essay of the collection, Lara Pellegrinelli's "Separated at 'Birth': Singing and the History of Jazz," provides an excellent reexamination of jazz historiography. Pellegrinelli argues that singing, although present in the origin stories of jazz, has been ignored within jazz scholarship more generally. As Pellegrinelli suggests, "Despite its symbolic and practical importance in jazz's parentage, singing is dropped from historical narratives soon after the music's birth" (32). She goes on to explain, "To present jazz as 'art music,' many authors attempted to divorce it from low culture and the entertainment contexts with which singing was associated, thereby containing sexuality and the female body. Instead, they focused their attention on horns that sound like voices, an elevation of 'raw' musical materials" (44). Although at first read Pellegrinelli's reexamination of the origins of jazz seems deceptively simple, her argument calls for a complete reevaluation of what jazz is and how jazz sounds. Bringing singing back into the chronology of jazz means not only expanding jazz history but also pulling women back in from the historical margins of jazz.

Of all of the essays in the collection, Jeffery Taylor's, "With Lovie and Lil: Rediscovering Two Chicago Pianists of the 1920s," is the only piece dealing directly with music theory. Taylor's chapter provides a solid discussion of musical accompanists in jazz and their neglect in a history of jazz that tends to focus on soloists. Taylor's essay reveals the lack of research on accompanists in jazz (male or female) and also provides a clear musical analysis of two prominent female jazz pianists of the 1920s, Lil Hardin Armstrong and Lovie Huston. In terms of methodology, Taylor demonstrates that musical analysis is an important and useful component to studying gender in music.

Sherrie Tucker's essay "'But this Music is Mine Already!': 'White Woman' as Jazz Collector in the Film *New Orleans* (1947)" provides a strong model for both reflexive research and jazz film historiography. Starting with the premise of "how white womanhood has shaped [her] own pathway of identification as a jazz fan," Tucker provides an examination of the white female jazz fan character in the film *New Orleans* (239). Tucker reworks Krin Gabbard's analysis of the "Jazz Nerd" (a white male jazz record collector and rabid jazz fan) into what she calls the "Jazz Virgin":

a white woman character who is stirred by what she hears in black music—which in this film is construed as sexuality, authenticity, emotion, newness, Americanness, and modernity—while *other characters* serve as her anxious protectors. (241)

Tucker then discusses the main "Jazz Virgin" in the film, Miralee, by providing a close reading of the film and its plot. Tucker also discusses the historical context in which the film was made (in the era of red-baiting) and details some of the possible real-life connections between an actual woman named Marili Morden and the film's protagonist. Connecting Morden's life to the film, Tucker shows how close readings, historical analysis, careful theoretical engagement, and reflexive writing can provide a strong model for listening for gender in jazz.

Julie Dawn Smith, in her article "Perverse Hystrices: The Noise *Cri* of Les Diaboliques," provides a close ethnographic examination of the all-female improvising trio from Europe, Les Diaboliques. Interspersing both theory on hysteria and detailed descriptions of one of Les Diaboliques' performances, Smith provides a solid example of ethnographic methodology on contemporary subjects.

Another essay that provides a valuable example of ethnography and jazz studies is João H. Costa Vargas' "Exclusion, Openness, and Utopia in Black Male Performance at the World Stage Jazz Jam Sessions." Vargas provides thick descriptions of the musical and social surroundings of the World Stage Jazz Jam Sessions in Leimart Park in Los Angeles. His work is based on 26 months of ethnography in and around the jam sessions. Vargas explains that while the World Stage Jazz Jam Sessions are often exclusionary to women and non-blacks, they also provide a potential utopian space because of their connection to improvised black music. Vargas' work demonstrates the wealth of knowledge to be gained from extensive ethnographic research. The only drawback of his study, however, is that the information is over ten years old. This is not to say that his findings are invalid, but a return to Leimart Park may have added to the already impressive study.

Nichole T. Rustin's article "Blow, Man, Blow!": Representing Gender, White Primitives, and Jazz Melodrama Through *A Young Man with a Horn*" explores both the novel (1938) and the film (1950) of the same name. Rustin reveals that "*Young Man with a Horn* negotiate[s] contemporary discourses about race, artistry, and masculinity within jazz culture, and each version represents the contradictions inherent in representations of such discourses" (363). Rustin's approach skillfully combines historical methodologies with race and gender theory.

Given the wide range of methodologies presented in *Big Ears*, the collection provides a variety of important approaches towards research in gender and jazz studies too numerous to discuss in this review. But the lack of review of the remaining essays is not an indication of their quality. Nevertheless, I have several critiques that warrant some attention here. *Big Ears* provides wonderful research in terms of North American and European jazz in relation to gender. However, and this is perhaps less a critique of the book than a call for further research, there is a need for gender studies scholarship in jazz outside of North America and Europe—particularly in western and southern Africa, Central and South America, Asia, and transnational considerations of jazz (such as Hugh Masekela's decision to play the trumpet after seeing *Young Man with a Horn*, for example). Finally, while several of the essays discuss the sound of jazz in relation to gender (Smith, Taylor, and Vargas, for example), more attention to the actual sound of the music is needed. I am not suggesting a McClaryian style analysis of chord progressions or similar studies, but more attention to the musical—combined with the social—elements of jazz will make the study of gender in jazz that much more powerful.

As historian George Lipsitz says in *Footsteps in the Dark: The Hidden Histories of Popular Music*,

the purpose of studying history is to train ourselves to look for its fetch, to realize that things that appear suddenly in our lives have a past, and to appreciate that part of what things are is how they came to be. Historical knowledge reveals that events that we perceive as immediate and proximate have causes and consequences that span great distances. (viii)

This is the work I see *Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz* as doing. It evaluates the long fetch of history that is jazz, and by contemplating and calling into question where that history came from, it helps us understand the past, present, and future of jazz more clearly.

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