

Breaking into the Boy's Club: The Creative Minds of Women in Jazz

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Abstract

As a music performance major, I am required to do a final senior recital as a culminating performance of my studies at SUNY New Paltz. Throughout my four years here, I have always been fascinated by the relationship between gender and music in terms of instrument choice, performance opportunities, confidence levels, among other factors. Since I began studying jazz four years ago, I have noticed that for the most part jazz vocalists are female and jazz instrumentalists are male, which seems to remain the case outside of the world of academia. Why is this? My hypothesis is that it is a systemic issue, one that was ingrained into the genre from its conception back in the late 19th century. This curiosity of mine resulted in the decision to perform songs in my recital that involve a woman in the composition, whether that be lyrics or music, or both. I plan to research and discuss these composers, as well as any themes that arise along the way.

Keywords: Vocal jazz performance, music, digital media management, gender, sexism, jazz, songwriting, inequality, singing, success, performance

This past semester I studied abroad in Berlin, Germany at the Freie Universität, where I took classes with students from all over the United States. A friend had asked me about my studies upon which I told them I studied jazz with my voice was my main instrument. They responded with the question, “so you’re not really a musician then, are you?” To this day I am not entirely sure what they meant. Did they think I am not a musician because I am a vocalist? Or because I am a girl? It is possible that it was both. I learned while studying voice at SUNY New Paltz that vocalists are not considered musicians to some, especially in the jazz world. How can that be? As a vocalist I rely solely on my ears and my body to create melody, which means music is a part of my being. Many months later this exchange has stuck with me because it correlates directly with questions I have asked myself since I began studying music at the collegiate level. It did not take long for me to realize that when looking at the jazz “greats,” most of them were men. Jazz standards were mostly written by men and sung by women. Where were the female jazz composers? I decided to dedicate this project to finding them and sharing their creations with the world. In this paper I will share recordings of myself singing songs written by Ann Ronell, Ida Cox, Fran Landesman, Peggy Lee, Joni Mitchell, and Annie Ross, offer information about their lives, as well as discuss key findings throughout the research process.

My research began with a shocking discovery of a lyrical theme among songs written by women—condoning unfaithfulness and domestic violence. Take Billie Holiday’s “Don’t Explain” as an example, released in 1945:

Cry to hear folks chatter
And I know you cheat
Right or wrong, don't matter
When you're with me, sweet
Hush now, don't explain
You're my joy and pain
My life's yours, love
Don't explain

Here we see a woman begging her husband to not explain why he did not come home because she knows the truth of his actions. She is complying with and therefore enabling his unfaithfulness because she loves him, but is allowing her partner to mistreat her in the process. Another example of this is blues musician Bessie Smith's "'Tain't Nobody's Bizness If I Do," recorded in 1923:

I'd rather my man would hit me
Than to jump up right and quit me
'T ain't nobody's bizness if I do, do, do, do
I swear I won't call no copper
If I'm beat up by my poppa
'T ain't nobody's bizness if I do, if I do

Here we see a woman telling us that she would rather her partner physically abuse her than leave her, again enabling intolerable behavior. It was shocking to see that these were common themes among songs written by female jazz composers, and it saddened me to think that they were written because they were true. However, this is not the case for all jazz tunes written by women. Now we will look at some compositions by renowned jazz composers who also happen to be women.

If my senior recital were to have taken place, I would have opened up the performance with Peggy Lee and Bill Schluger's swing tune "I Love Being Here With You," because of its upbeat energy and welcoming lyrics. Attached below is a recording of me singing this tune.



"I Love Being Here With You" performed by Carly Walsh

Peggy Lee was born Norma Egstrom in North Dakota in 1920. She began making music at a young age and was discovered early on by a big North Dakota radio station, putting her songs and her voice on the airwaves and into the ears of the public. Success came in 1941 when she

was hired as the singer with the Benny Goodman Orchestra, catapulting her into popular music and onto the charts. Some of her most well-known pieces of music are “Fever,” “I Love Being Here With You,” as well as the score featured in the Disney movie *Lady and the Tramp* (Encyclopædia Britannica). Peggy Lee was celebrated by many in not only the music industry, but film as well. She acted in several movies and television series which kept her in the forefront of popular culture. She is quoted as a musical influence for many vocalists today and continues to be celebrated.

The next song in my setlist was going to be “Willow, Weep For Me,” written by Ann Ronell, featured in the recording below.



“Willow, Weep for Me” performed by Carly Walsh

Ann Ronell was born Ann Rosenblatt in Omaha, Nebraska in 1905. While in college she worked as a journalist for her school newspaper where she interviewed many composers, one of them being the one and only George Gershwin. After meeting Gershwin, he offered to connect her to his contacts in the music business which resulted in her becoming a rehearsal pianist for shows on Broadway. She composed this tune, “Willow, Weep for Me” for Gershwin as a token of gratitude for his hand in Ronell’s success. Some of her other achievements include the composition of “Who’s Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?” in collaboration with Walt Disney Studios, as well as numerous film scores and musical director positions for Hollywood films (New York Public Library). After decades of a successful film and musical career Ronell died on her 88th birthday in 1993.

The next tune in the setlist is a ballad titled “Spring Can Really Hang You Up The Most,” with music written by Tommy Wolf and lyrics by Fran Landesman.



“Spring Can Really Hang You Up The Most” performed by Carly Walsh

Fran Landesman was born in New York City in 1927 and had quite an interesting life, being remembered as a lyricist and poet. She and her husband Jay Landesman moved to St. Louis, Missouri in the 1950s and opened up The Crystal Palace, a famous nightclub, bar, and performance venue. There she met pianist Tommy Wolf who became one of Landesman’s greatest collaborators. Wolf wrote the music and Landesman wrote the lyrics for many songs, some of which became jazz standards. “Spring Can Really Hang You Up The Most” was one of those tunes that became a standard, and Landesman’s lyrics were said to be inspired by a T.S. Eliot poem called *The Waste Land*, which begins with the line “April is the cruelest month...” (NPR, 2011). The Landesmans were known to be free spirits, specifically in terms of their openness in regard to polyamory. In an interview with NPR, Landesman talks about what it was like to be a songwriter in a male dominated field. She said, “they weren’t interested in women doing anything but emptying the ashtrays,” (NPR, 2011). To combat this, Landesman stayed true to herself writing witty, satirical and sentimental lyrics that could not be mimicked. Her lyric writing efforts also resulted in some Broadway musicals as well as praise from Beat writers Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg. Fran Landesman passed away in 2011.

Next up is a standard blues called “Wild Women Don’t Have the Blues,” by Ida Cox.



“Wild Women Don’t Have The Blues” performed by Carly Walsh

Ida Cox was born in Toccoa, Georgia in 1896, and is to some considered the “Uncrowned Queen of the Blues,” outshined by Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith (The Blues Foundation). When Cox was a teenager, she performed on the road with minstrel shows and was eventually discovered by a representative of Paramount Records, with which she recorded for six years. During the Great Depression she continued to perform with touring theatrical groups, eventually bringing her to perform at the prestigious Carnegie Hall. She entertained at United States Army camps during World War II, but eventually suffered a stroke and had to retire from music in 1945. Ida Cox passed away in 1967.

Up next is a song by Joni Mitchell called “Cactus Tree,” from her first record “Song to a Seagull” in 1968. I arranged the song for four voices, attached you will hear the demo recording.

Joni Mitchell was born Roberta Joan Anderson in Alberta, Canada in 1943. She began her life as an artist and spent time painting, writing poetry and dabbling with a baritone ukulele. After spending one year at the Alberta College of Art, she moved to Toronto to pursue music professionally (Breese). There she played several small clubs but did not make much money. Mitchell eventually moved to the United States where she was given a slot at the Newport Folk Festival, putting her in front of a crowd of 10,000 people or more. Many well-known artists covered her songs including Buffy Sainte-Marie, Judy Collins, and Tom Rush. After moving to New York City, Mitchell lived the life of a touring musician travelling all over the country and releasing music year after year. In the beginning of her career she mostly stuck with folk music, but as time went on she became more interested in jazz and played with some of the most popular jazz musicians of the 1970s and 80s such as Charles Mingus and Jaco Pastorius. Joni

Mitchell's music has been celebrated for decades and continues to pave the path for many aspiring songwriters today. To some, she is considered one of the greatest songwriters of all time.

Last but certainly not least, is a tune called "Twisted," a vocalese with the music written by Wardell Gray and lyrics by Annie Ross. A vocalese is a style of singing in which lyrics are written to an improvised solo, therefore creating a new melody. Vocalese are often challenging melodies and can be difficult to sing. This song is upbeat and has high energy, which is why I chose it to close out my recital.



"Twisted" performed by Carly Walsh

Annie Ross was born Annabelle Short in Surrey, England in 1930, and was raised in Los Angeles, California. She had musical parents who brought her into the artistic world at a very young age, and she worked as a child actor for several years. In high school, Ross decided to change her name and pursue her singing career. "Twisted" came into existence in 1952 after a consultation with the owner of Prestige Records, and Ross' career kicked off. She is mostly recognized for her work with the vocal trio Lambert, Hendricks, and Ross, with which she recorded several albums and toured the world. Annie Ross is still alive today at 89 years old and performs regularly (NEA).

Although jazz was, and still is, a male dominated musical genre, that does not mean there were not women working usually twice as hard to be heard and respected. Today we see many female jazz musicians that move against the grain and defy the traditional stereotype in which men are instrumentalists and women are vocalists. Examples include Esperanza Spalding, a

modern jazz composer who accompanies herself with an upright bass, or the jazz super group, Artemis. Artemis consists of seven musicians, six instrumentalists and one vocalist, all of which are women. Since jazz is a male dominated genre, it is rare to see more than one female instrumentalist on stage at a time. In an interview on NPR's radio show *Jazz Night in America*, Artemis member Renee Rosnes says that she is longing for the day in which her band can have a performance and not be instantly deemed the "all-female band," but rather a band that plays jazz. Even though we are a long way away from equality, the mere existence of bands like Artemis is a step in the right direction. If we continue to celebrate the achievements of women in jazz, we will see them more and more often and eventually there will be no divide at all.

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