

The Legacies of Jazz Musicians on Film + Jazz, Gender and Identity

1. The Legacies of Musicians on Film

Duke Ellington and Max Roach: How History Informs the Present

Duke Ellington has had a significant impact not only jazz music proper, but also on its representation in the film industry during the 1930s. He composed and performed for various films such as *Black and Tan* (1929), *Cabin in the Sky* (1943), and *Symphony and Black* (1935), existing in the films as the leader of orchestras. The worsening status of civil rights in America during this time period, specifically regarding deficits in unemployment and housing, fostered an ever-present environment of racism and bigotry in the music and film industries. During this time, Duke Ellington's musicianship and fame assisted him in emerging as a powerful leader for the Black voice by starring in films and championing Black agency in popular media—something that was controversial and rare at the time. As Krin Gabbard points out, “Ellington had hoped for an opportunity to provide a humanizing view of Black Americans” (Gabbard 174).

By effectively bridging the gap between the music and the performer, Ellington renegotiated the black Americans' way of experiencing jazz by reconnecting music to a body—an auditory process now became a visual one, associating the music of freedom with images that reinforced the sensibility. This allowed for increased accessibility for the average person to witness Jazz as it is meant to be. Moreover, this visual platform allowed Ellington to speak to issues of race, civil rights, identity, and freedom, more so than had been done before by his contemporaries. Harvey G. Cohen sheds light on how Duke Ellington's appearances in film symbolized a reimagining of black artistic identity during tumultuous times, citing how his manager marketed Ellington as a “serious” musician. It is important to note that Ellington's

manager, Irving Mills, had not exerted this push for a “dignified image” consciously and with altruistic intentions—”it was just creating a larger audience” (Cohen 423). Despite this, it was Ellington’s own politics and personality that had elevated him to this position:

“No one else looked, sounded or was treated in the media quite like Ellington...He walked, talked, and created as if Jim Crow restrictions had never existed, his every move demonstrating the falsity of white supremacy” (Cohen 423).

The energy with which Duke performed and occupied the spaces in these films captivated and enthralled audiences, and does so even today. Beyond just aesthetic and musical influence, these films from the 1930s serve as important historical pieces that shape how we can understand, listen to, and engage with jazz music as a whole. Ellington’s compositions in these films accompanied a diegesis that encouraged conversations about social justice and racial discrimination. Through these conduits of storytelling, visual stimulus, and auditory excellence, Ellington’s films of the 1930s reflect a rich canvas onto which jazz listeners and performers of today can situate the genre within a more comprehensive cultural background.

Similarly, Max Roach was one such figure whose reach and influence extended beyond just music. Known for his innovative drumming style wherein he hybridized facets of BeBop, swing music, and jazz, Roach was also a notable activist. His outspoken championing for racial equality manifested in various ways, but most notably was the “We Insist! Freedom now Suite” album. Roach’s experimental style lent itself to provide for new foundations for the articulation of the perils of oppression and the struggle for equality and freedom against discrimination. Amiri Baraka contends that Roach’s indelible impact on jazz music and black popular culture is exemplified in his music groups, born out of his “consistent voice of innovation and high

creativity as an artist”. He calls M’Boom “one of the most celebrated of relatively new and conceptually unique improvising repertory ensembles in music” (Baraka 216).

Baraka elucidates Roach’s large reach within both the commercial and the political aspects of the music business, claiming that he had an undeniable awareness of “the contradictory and opposing forces armed against the clear and honest portrayal of the music” (Baraka 216). In spite of this, in *Max Roach: The Drum Also Waltzes*, through carefully curated archival footage we learn that Roach was never satisfied with his development as a musician. We see him emerge as successful out of various monumental eras of the genre, from his success with Dizzy Gillespie in the ‘40s, to playing with Fab Five Freddy in the ‘80s—Roach was constantly looking for new ways to reinvent both himself, and his militant acts of reform against the system. His frequent collaborations with influential artists, such as Abbey Lincoln, Clifford Brown, and Quincy Jones reflect his aim to create socio-political commentary and voice declarations of civil disobedience and advocacy for change.

The Drum Also Waltzes showcases Roach’s flexibility and willingness to appraise new forms of music that may seem only tangentially related, and reinvent his sound and activism through those means. His incorporation of Afro-Cuban music, theater music, abstract percussion music, and hip-hop broadened the horizons through which he was able to challenge the status quo. Symbolically, Roach was showing the world what could not be seen at the surface, but was undeniably yearning for exposure. The documentary, directed by Sam Pollard and Ben Shapiro, also reflects on the nature of Max Roach’s collaborations with various artists. His cooperative endeavors with influential musicians and activists such as Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, and Abbey Lincoln emphasize the importance of dialogue and empathy within the art form. This

reflects a larger tradition within jazz music—one of listening, responding, and emotive resonance—which strengthens community and understanding among different cultures and races.

Both these artists devoted their careers to speaking truth to power through their art, and served as inspiring voices for the black American. In this way we can learn how jazz is an inherently experimental and provocative art form that can both inspire change and quell fears of erasure of racial identity—both Duke Ellington and Max Roach pushed the boundaries of emotional expression and artistic innovation in ways that can intensely changed the way jazz music is heard and created. A certain consciousness within listeners and performers is encouraged, fostered, and built—and therefore, jazz music stands as one of the most historically and culturally significant art forms in recent history.

2. Jazz and Gender

Jazz, Gender, and Identity

The genesis of jazz music has been chiefly attributed to the contributions of men—women in the field were either denied entry, or cast aside and disregarded. Due to this, there has been a broad misconception in jazz-listening audiences the “greats” in jazz were primarily men, while the women were merely an accepted category within it. The calculator surrounding jazz has also historically been extremely male-centric, lauding destructive and competitive behavior as productive, while women in the field continue to face challenges breaking through. Despite this, jazz history boasts an intricate historical timeline wherein women continually, in the face of major hegemonic pressures, break through the mold and challenge what once was a predominantly male-oriented community.

Gender does not exist in a vacuum—it is a way through which we can study and analyze various constituents of identity that inform it. Sexuality and race are two major categories within which gender, and specifically gender and jazz, can be dissected. This essay, with the use of two films, namely *Bessie* (2010) and *The Girls in the Band* (2011), aims to explore this intersectionality and impart a sense of how gender informs the jazz tradition.

In *Bessie*, we follow the tumultuous life of the ‘Empress of the Blues’, Bessie Smith. We follow her rise to fame from humble beginnings, as she navigates the male-dominated music industry. In the first few scenes of the film, Bessie meets Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, who helps her through the growing pains of her singing career. It is crucial to note that both Ma Rainey and Smith were queer women in an industry that favored heteronormativity, a status quo that was vehemently defended and preserved prior. As K. Allison Hammer elucidates, these two artists practiced a defiance of “heteronormative and racially constructed notions of ‘family’ and ‘home’” (Hammer 280). In accordance with this argument, both Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey are shown to be traveling artists, touring from state to state performing their music and spreading their talents. Hammer likens this to the “sexually libertine outrageous” tendency for these artists to move out of traditional gender roles as queer women, and as she typifies, “bull dykes” (Hammer 279-280). This form of questioning of the status quo was not new to the jazz and blues tradition but their specific defiance of what classifies “womanhood” and femininity challenged even the most radical of activists. Bessie Smith’s music, too, was born out of a rage and betrayal which lent it an errant quality that defied the stereotypical “feminine singer”. Hammer contends that this type of singing initiated a specific “B.D.-styles blues...[that] emanates from a low and deep place”, and that this innovation and forwardness that Bessie generated “a grandiosity based in masculine

monumentality...[which] allowed her to discover independence and freedom of movement as key themes” (Hammer 288-289).

Another upshot of this defiant practice of a restrictive mode of communication by Bessie Smith is a way she used her music as a spiritual mode of expression. In *Preaching the Blues: Spirituality and Self-Consciousness*, Angela Davis contends that the blues tradition in music allows for a conduit for African-American women to reclaim agency of their own sorrows, pains, pleasures, and struggles. We see in the film how Smith used her singing as a way of voicing her pains within both her public and private lives, not only in an expressive sense, but also as a form of prayer. In this way, we can gain a deeper understanding of the role of race within the larger discussion of gendered expression in the jazz/blues tradition.

In *Big Ears: Listening for Jazz in Gender Studies*, Sherrie Tucker examines the confluence of jazz and gender and its position within the collective consciousness of jazz listeners, scholars, and performers. It has long been understood, albeit downplayed, that women in the music industry have received reduced appreciation for their contributions to the art form, and also that gender and sex within the jazz traditions takes a backseat to the status quo. *The Girls in the Band* (2011) is a broad exploration of this very phenomenon, tracing the histories of various influential jazz musicians and ensembles over the last century and shedding a significant light on their contributions to the art form. The documentary accentuates many influential women and their stories of enduring and overcoming prejudice and marginalization throughout their careers. We see the origin of the International Sweethearts of Rhythm, the first racially-integrated all-women jazz ensemble in the United States and their journey of transcending boundaries of race and breaking through the glass ceiling. The band had an undeniable influence on women in jazz during their time, but noticeable is the decline in their coverage in jazz studies and popular

media. Specifically, Tucker cites Ken Burns' exclusion of their story from his *Jazz* (2001) documentary—she connects this to a larger trend in jazz studies of exclusion of critical scholarship of the interaction between sexuality and gender within the art form (Tucker 375-377). *The Girls in the Band* provides for a reassertion of gender awareness when listening to and performing jazz music, serving as a reminder of the yearned reality that Tucker calls for.

Both these films exemplify the conflict present within the jazz genre when it comes to exploring the intersectionality of race, gender, and sexual identity. They serve as stark calls to action for listeners, performers, and scholars of the gendered nature of music as a whole. No art form can be discerned at face value—they are all more than the sum of their parts. We must place just as much importance on the lesser apparent factors of the formation of jazz music as a genre in the United States as we do on the more 'famous' stories that conform to cisnormative sensibilities.

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