# Jazz Backstory Podcast

# Episode #34 — Women in Jazz

[audio introduction]

Welcome Jazz Backstory listeners to Season 5, Episode 34. Jazz has often been called America's only original art form. I happen to not agree with that statement but it is true that jazz is woven into the cultural fabric of America and is arguably our most significant gift to the world. The music and its prominent performers have been and continue to be, the subject of numerous books and scholarly papers. A favorite topic in the last fifty years, especially in academia, has been "Women in Jazz," our Episode 34 focus.

In the past, when the topic of the scarcity of women in jazz history came up, I occasionally offered up a joke, attributing it to some vague source as I knew it wasn't really humorous. It went something like, "why haven't there been more women in jazz?" "Because they're too smart to make a career of it." Not even worth a rim shot. It is a fact that for the majority of jazz history, roughly one hundred years, women have been decidedly in the minority. Recently I was perusing through the Fillius Jazz Archive collections while preparing for this episode. I came across an issue of *DownBeat* magazine from February, 1942. The publication was actually in the form of a newspaper at the time and of the twelve articles and photos on the front page, two were about women. What did they do to make the front page? One article concerned Alfa Armstrong, the third wife of Louis Armstrong. *DownBeat* reported that Alfa had submitted a request to a judge for a $250 a week separation fee settlement. The second article was titled "Ex-Chirper Set for Flicker Career." In the pin-up style photo, this lovely chirper is perched on a bass drum case, stockinged legs prominently displayed. The text explains, "Blonde and blue-eyed Vivian Blaine arrived in Hollywood last week with a 20th Century Fox contract in her purse. Miss Blaine until recently, was a singer, working in New York. In a campaign in the nation's Army camps, she was selected "Miss Lo-Lo-Lita, Sweetheart of the Army." End quote. The articles and photographs in this 1942 *DownBeat* issue numbered 20 to 1 in favor of male musicians, the women who made the publication were all singers, including Betty Koch, pictured in a photo holding a large saxophone. The caption reads, "dig this chick with the baritone, finding a squeaky pad for her husband Joe!" In 1942, *DownBeat* writers were certainly employing their

expertise on behalf of women in jazz. We'll reference a more recent *DownBeat* later in the episode. Before we listen to the women who dealt with this culture, here is an excerpt on the subject from our April 2013 conversation with the late Dan Morgenstern, author, critic and former director of the Rutgers Institute of Jazz Studies:

MR: I was curious if you think there's a reason that women were sort of on the outside in jazz for so many years.

DM: Well it would be several things. I mean one may be the question of attitude, you know, male superiority or whatever. The other may have been to some extent a practical matter. You know during the big band era the only women who were really involved were the singers and the singer usually had to hook up with one of the guys in the band, either marry them or be the girlfriend of, in order to be protected from the usual male stuff. So that was another reason maybe why even if there was, or had been, a really talented and competitive female instrumentalist, there would have been a reluctance on the part of the band leader to hire her because of the potential difficulties. And then also you know, with being on the road, okay, so the guys, you can sleep on the bus, if you check into a hotel room you double up. There were problems, practical problems. But maybe also there were not so many women I think who wanted to enter this whole field which (a) was competitive, (b) was not — except for people like us — maybe highly regarded by members of the family, or whatever. But it was mainly, it's a little similar to what happened in terms of integration acceptance. You know jazz people were pioneers in being accepting of African-Americans. It was really the first public arena in which there was integration to some noticeable extent. And in terms of what was going on behind the scenes among musicians of course there was a notable absence of prejudice because after all most of the white musicians in jazz were inspired originally by a black performer. So it's logical. But with women there was an attitude. And there were these practical circumstances. And there was a shortage of women who were prepared to really cope with all these obstacles.

And a shortage of parents who would let them. Mr. Morgenstern reminds us of the practical matters involved in the jazz life. Bands had to travel to thrive, and most of them barely survived.

Let's imagine 21 year old saxophonist Vi Redd telling her father she was going on the road with the Count Basie Band. "You're what!? Riding a bus with eighteen young men and staying in cheap hotels, three to a room with booze and God knows what else being passed around!" Now I made that up but I'm positive it happened to aspiring women musicians. Speaking of saxophonist and vocalist Vi Redd, here she is, from our interview in Los Angeles, February, 1999.

MR: How do you feel about the history of how women have been treated in the world of jazz?

VR: Just like they've been treated in other professions, not too good. But it's improving as I see some of the younger women musicians playing. Not a whole lot, but I saw, recently there was some television shows that were using an all-women's band. But it was like a gimmick thing again, like going back to that gimmick thing and I don't like that. But it's improved some, but just like I mean for women, and then the gender thing and the race aspect, where black women are concerned, we have two strikes, but it has improved, I'll say that. You'll run across a guy sometimes that don't want you to play with them. A lady was asking me that. Her daughter was concerned because the guys wouldn't let her play. I said, "Well just keep practicing, and just get on up there and just play, push them out of the way." If they don't want you to play you just play anyhow. And you always have the audience on your side. So just play. Practice and get good, and the more you play the better you'll be. So that's it. You have to get kind of — you don't have to particularly be masculine but you have to be forceful.

MR: Aggressive.

VR: Aggressive, that's the word. You have to be aggressive and say hey, I want to be heard too you know? I still get snubs after all these years sometimes, and I just get on up there and play and then after that then they say, "Oh, okay."

MR: You have to prove yourself.

VR: Right. Absolutely.

Vi Redd did end up touring briefly with the Basie band in the 1960s and hinted at the attitude she dealt with, saying, "They needed somebody that could sing the blues, I mostly sang, rather than played, those guys had a problem with me playing."

[audio interlude]

Dan Morgenstern mentioned “the usual male stuff” and Vi Redd indicated that the stuff was present in most professions during their active years. Drummer Sherrie Maricle experienced it, even at jam sessions.

SM You know when I was first learning I would go to all those jam sessions, and I did, and I would go every night, although it was sometimes a struggle as a woman, I mean at least the person that ran the Blue Note jam session would never let me play. And then one time he said, “Well you can play if you take your shirt off.” And later he would say, “All right honey well you can play it but here’s the tempo” and it would be some real slow ballad. So then he would let me play ballads for a couple of nights. And I rarely got to play. But like you’re always overcoming that stupidity also, but just to be in that environment. And like you see all your peers. And then sometimes I remember at one jam session I was at the Jazz Coalition and I was sitting there and it was all night and I was dying to play. But it got like really late and it was about quarter to two and I was like oh, they’re not going to ask me to play, it’s too late. So I think I had three beers or something. And then the music was all great so I was happy and then I hear my name, “Sherrie Maricle.” Like oh, no, because I didn’t want to. And I went up to play and it was with Jon Hendricks, the singer, who just happened to be there. And there was a great bass player, Jamil Nasser and Harold Mabern, a great pianist. And I remember Jon Hendricks wanted to play “Cloudburst.” You know and it was so fast. And here I am riding on three beers like in a half an hour or something. And it was all like — I mean I was grateful to the bass player — help me, you know. So it taught me a lesson. Soda pops. It’s like you can never drink a speck ever and attempt to play.

MR: You better be ready when your moment comes, huh?

SM: Yeah. That was funny. That was a good lesson.

Blues and jazz grew up side by side, sharing instrumentation, song forms, audiences and the aforementioned “male stuff.” During our September 2007 interview, blues artist Ann Rabson spoke about her experiences.

MR: Was there a — this may sound silly, but — was there an issue as far as being a non-feminine thing to do? Like if you play guitar you can't grow your nails long, right? And in junior high — you were like not concerned about it?

AR: I was really isolated. I really isolated myself. I hated school. I didn't enjoy the society of people much. But as I got older of course, male musicians who couldn't play as well as I did, I mean I've heard "Oh you can't play guitar" or "women shouldn't play guitar because a guitar is like a woman, it's shaped like a woman."

MR: Oh my God.

AR: Or I also heard, "Women shouldn't play guitar because look it's a man thing, it's got that thing sticking up." So you know, wait a minute, which way is it? But I didn't pay any attention to them. I knew what was going on. But what was a problem was getting work. I was living in Chicago and I couldn't get auditions. I mean I don't think I've ever auditioned for a job I didn't get. But they wouldn't pay any attention to me. I mean I'd show up with my acoustic guitar, this is in Chicago. And they'd say, "Oh we don't have folk music here." And I'd say, "Well I don't play folk music, I play blues." And they'd look at me like, "What?" You know, well, yeah, right, come back next Saturday. So then maybe they did that to everybody, but I got the feeling, well I also got the feeling that if I'd go to bed with them it might have been different. I mean you know I was a lot younger and prettier and all that, well not prettier but I was younger then.

At this point in our podcast episodes we normally offer up a sampling of jazz vocabulary terms so you can be hip and drop them into cocktail party conversations. I'm taking a different approach today, but with equal potential to be hip. The next time the topic of women in jazz comes up be ready with a few of the best examples. Feel free to jot these names down. First up, pianist Lillean Armstrong, the first wife of Louis Armstrong. Lillean performed on the now historic recordings of the Hot Five and Hot Seven, that coincidentally took place one hundred years ago. It was Lillean who jump started Satchmo's career, encouraging him to step out of King Oliver's shadow and make the world aware of his genius. Billie Holiday and Ella Fitzgerald, totally different stylistically, vie for the ultimate jazz vocalist spot. This topic is an excellent debate starter at that cocktail party, assuming the vibe is at least moderately hip. Trombonist Melba Liston was the first female to play in a swing era group that was not an "all-

girl band" A respected trombonist and arranger, Melba was recognized in 1987 with an NEA Jazz Masters Fellowship Award. Another Jazz Masters Award recipient, Carla Bley was one of the most prominent and forward thinking composers in the last 50 years combining free jazz, unique instrumentation and occasional musical humor in her work. We have interviewed over 50 women for the Fillius Jazz Archive and you can search them out on the Fillius Jazz YouTube channel. Particularly memorable interviewees include saxophonist Jane Ira Bloom, vocalist Annie Ross, bassist Nicki Parrott and pianist and NPR Piano Jazz host Marian McPartland. And here's Marian, speaking to the issue of women in jazz.

MR: Was there ever a point where it was an advantage to you? Or has it always been pretty much kind of an uphill struggle?

MM: I don't think it was ever an uphill struggle for me, because I sort of had my indoctrination in working with Jimmy and boy Jimmy was so supportive and proud of me. And so when I started at The Embers as a trio and Ed and Don, they couldn't be nicer. I mean very seldom did I have a bad experience. I did have one guy at The Embers for a short time, I can't think of his name — just as well — and I had to fire him and boy having to fire somebody that just really, you know I could probably do it now with great aplomb but luckily I haven't had to. But I never had a real problem there. The only problems, or not problems, but things would be like I remember the first review I had from Leonard Feather was, "she has three strikes against her: she's English, white and a woman." And I don't know it didn't bother me that much. I don't remember being too upset about that. And the worst things would probably be from the audience like, "Oh you play good for a girl," or, "you sound just like a man." I mean we don't hear those things anymore. And I mean there were a lot of women on the scene: Mary Lou Williams, Barbara Carroll, people I'd heard before I got there — Hazel Scott, Lil Armstrong. I never felt that the women were in such bad shape I guess. They went ahead and they had consciousness raising and I remember talking to Barbara about this, and she said, "Well I didn't notice a thing, we've just been playing and doing our thing right along." And I never had to feel that things were tough. I never did. I still like things like having the door opened for me and I don't have trouble with political correctness. If the bass player wants to put his arm around me, that's okay.

I opened the door for Marian after this interview but kept my arm to myself. I'm not a bass player. Leonard Feather was a respected author and critic although jazz musicians sometimes sarcastically referred to him as "Learned Father". Later in Marian's career, his "three strikes against her" comment by became a worthwhile promo for Marian's publicist, used in the context of "Oh yeah? Look what she did!"

I mentioned that the women in jazz topic has been the focus of numerous studies and papers in academia. The following is an excerpt from a paper published in the September 2018 edition of Qualitative Sociology. It was written by Chelsea Wahl, Hamilton College class of 2013 and now an Assistant Professor of Public Health at St. John Fisher University and Stephen Ellingson, Professor of Sociology at Hamilton College. Their research was based on the thirty interviews with women conducted for the Fillius Jazz Archive. Here is an excerpt from their work:

"Cultural explanations for women's subordinate roles in the arts tend to emphasize how ideologies and assumption about gender, work to limit women's entrance into various occupations. According to jazz historian Burton Peretti, women were restricted to the roles of pianist and vocalist because these musical activities reinforced women's association with the Victorian home parlor and the domestic sphere as a whole. The skills and traits necessary to succeed in jazz were assumed to be masculine. A jazz instrumentalist must be able to improvise, an activity that requires aggression, confidence and the physical stamina to play loudly for an extended period of time. Most women who managed professional careers through the 1940s were singers, even the rare instrumentalist was required to sing to legitimize their presence on stage. During the first half of the 20th century jazz was most often played in bars and nightclubs located in the so called vice districts. The urban jazz world, both in its performance venues and places where musicians gathered to jam, eat and find work was a distinctly male world. Famed jazz singer Betty Carter succinctly states that "Pimps, prostitutes, hustlers, gangsters and gamblers" were the general clientele of early jazz. The press morally stigmatized the new art form for decades because it "encouraged dancing and other licentious behaviors".

[audio interlude]

The majority of women artists that we interviewed acknowledged modest progress in the current jazz landscape. Women can now be found at the highest levels of jazz performance and academia. Christine Jensen is an Assistant Professor of Saxophone and Contemporary Media at the prestigious Eastman School of Music. Here is an excerpt from our March 2024 conversation:

MR: When we started today you had made a reference to jazz education and how — I forget your exact words but it leads me to wonder about women in jazz and women in jazz education. Do you have a feeling about — is it progressing? Where is it at?

CJ: I have very mixed feelings about the word “progressing” with it. But there are some great things that are coming out. There’ve always been some great things. Maybe this time they won’t be so hidden. I still think there’s a boy’s club going on and an example of a hero of mine, honestly, I’ve been really obsessing over those Rick Beato videos lately. They’re all men talking about music for the most part. There are some women, very few, and then they like to do things like say “Brad Mehldau is the pianist of our — the greatest pianist of our generation.” And I’m like you’re not helping anything when you say these things. Do you know what I mean? I mean it’s great Brad is endowed as the greatest piano player of our generation. A whole bunch of people are going to watch that and go “Brad Mehldau is the greatest piano player of our generation.” And I’m like there are so many other pianists that you’re not talking about in this breath that you might want to defend. I’m not going to get into it right now, but how do we change this machine of men kind of being the ones on stage still with other men. What does it take to change it? I don’t know. Does it mean the club owners have to say you need to have 50/50 on stage of 25/75 I don’t know, that would be even a cool number.

MR: I remember speaking with Karolina Strassmayer and when she was chosen for this European big band it was like splashed all over whatever media would pick up on it, and then it became a tag line — you know it’s like a tag line with her.

CJ: Yes. I’ve worked over there too. I was the one female musician too. So, and I’m guilty of it myself. I’m surrounding myself with mostly men in a big band but at least I have my music, I get to choose who’s there, including my sister. I get to play in it this way. I get to play whatever I want. And I’ve kind of created my own circumstances for this to happen

and I can't say that it's a bad thing because the other thing was like going, "Oh I just really want to play in that big band down the road that I can play second alto in." It just didn't really ring true to me either. It wasn't part of the visual or the visage of this music. It's more like I want to be creating and not just interpreting I guess. So lucky me because I just sort of threw all that other stuff aside and went if you want me it's about what I have to offer as a composer and a musician I guess.

Women in jazz is also an ongoing issue across the pond. Christine mentioned Karolina Strassmayer and the state-sponsored WDR Big Band in Germany. Karolina became a reluctant then committed spokesperson after being chosen as the first woman member.

KS: Yes. It was quite a big — I don't want to say uproar — but there was a lot of media interest because none of the German radio or European radio big bands had a female member at the time. This was 2004 when I joined. And yes, it was kind of strange. It was a little bit similar to I don't know if you remember that in the 90s I think it was when the Vienna Philharmonic began accepting women because they were pressured. There were even articles in the *New York Times* and it was, in the WDR this was not the case, it just so happened that I joined. And the decision was made by all the band members. But it was kind of strange for me at first because there was all this interest, also womens' magazines and newspapers, and they all just wanted to know what is it like to be the only woman in the WDR Big Band. And nobody asked me about my musical background you know they all just wanted to know are they nice to you or are you allowed to play solos? Do they make jokes or do they grope you? It was quite sensationalist, depending on the publications. I really began to really loathe that question, like oh what is it like to be the only woman and I really never wanted to deal with that because I thought please just let me play music. I am a person who plays music. But I realized over time that it is something unusual, it is something that interests people because they see it, they see a band of eighteen people and one woman in there and they want to know why, they want to know what is it like, and I get it. I really get that. And I've really come to embrace the question and I've also come to embrace the opportunity that I have in this position with this visibility that I have in the WDR Big Band not only through my musical contribution but I've become very outspoken about being a woman in jazz.

Let's return to *DownBeat* magazine and check what progress has been made on this topic after 82 years. The 2024 Critics Poll included 55 categories, divided between established artists and talent deserving of wider recognition. Women vocalists, instrumentalists, composers and bandleaders placed in the top three of 27 categories. That's a long way from articles about chirpers and estranged wives of famous male jazz cats.

Speaking of male jazz cats reminds me of the once common "cutting contest", the decidedly competitive jam session with macho overtones where reputations were enhanced or diminished. I am not aware of any anecdotes with women involved in these all night jams but that does not mean a competitive spirit was absent when multiple ladies met on stage. We'll wrap up with a story from pianist, vocalist and bandleader Jeannie Cheatham, interviewed in San Diego with her husband, trombonist Jimmy Cheatham.

MR: Tell me about the PBS Special you did with Sippie Wallace.

Jean: And Big Mama? That was our concept. And this lady at KPBS came to us and asked if we wanted to do some kind of special or what we wanted to do. She said it would be a half hour. And so we told her what ideas we had about bringing Big Mama and Sippie Wallace and myself together — three generations of the blues. We were doing a jam session, still, and we set it up so that Sippie would do the first, a whole show, an hour. This was at the Belly Up.

Jim: Tavern. Which is up north in Solana Beach.

Jean: And then Big Mama would do hers. And then I would do mine. And at the end of mine we'd do a finale. But we didn't tell Sippie or Big Mama that we were going to do a finale.

Jim: How that was going to go down.

Jean: Because they are very ornery people, both of them, and we didn't want them to throw anything into the works. So Sippie, she did hers, and Big Mama did hers, and then when I did mine, then I said, "Ladies and Gentlemen, now we're going to have a good old fashioned finale. And we're going to call up these ladies, Sippie Wallace and Big Mama Thorton." They stopped. They were at the bottom of the step watching me because they

had never heard me sing. And I had played for Big Mama all these years and she had never heard me sing.

Jim: She didn't even know she could sing.

Jean: She didn't know I could sing, see? This was her first time. So they were standing at the bottom of the stage watching me, and so, here they come up on the stage. Now they're going to show this young whippersnapper who— Sippie Wallace came up there and she started singing to Big Mama. And telling her off. Making up lyrics.

Jim: Oh, yeah, she was improvising.

Jean: She was improvising. And so Big Mama would take a part and then Big Mama said, [sings] "Yeah you will come to my house and I'm gonna kick you out of my back door." "Oh no you won't." And I got so intrigued watching them fight, until I forgot I was supposed to sing too.

Jim: And I kind of, because I could see the cameras was on them you know. And I said, "You better get in there because it'll never happen."

Jean: Really. Because I forgot, I was fascinated. I was so used to playing for somebody else. And I said, "Ladies, ladies — you don't have to fuss and fight" you know.

Jim: And when she did it, of course she had that little light growl. I mean she sliced through the whole thing. And when she did that everybody said — immediately, like lightning struck them. And they looked to her, and that's when the camera hit her.

Jean: And so boy it was a great moment. Because they had been fighting in the dressing room.

MR: See now if you had tried to stage that—

Jim: No way.

Jean: No way.

I wish I had been there for that one. Thanks for tuning in and a reminder that you can view the complete video interviews with these personalities on the Fillius Jazz YouTube channel, that's F-I-L-L-I-U-S. Episode 35 will focus on vocalists, female and male, what to do and not to do to be on the right side of your accompanists. We'll go out with an excerpt from a tune called "Standard Time" a composition I wrote for the CD "Jazz Life" after interviewing pianist Jane Jarvis. See you on the flip side.

[Audio Interlude "Standard Time" by Monk Rowe]