“None Of Us Think About Being A Woman:”
Performing Gender Without Norms

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Abstract: This paper discusses how female jazz instrumentalists perform gender while talking about gender in the context of jazz. Drawing on Judith Butler’s notion of gender as a norm, I argue that these women’s different attitudes embody different types of gender performance. I am most interested in those women who insist that they never think of being a woman. I consider these women to be performing gender without norms. Further, I will explore why they choose to do this type of gender performance, which, I suggest, would keep the existing gender norms unchanged.
In a round-table discussion involving nine female jazz musicians on the topic of her Grammy winning The Mosaic Project that features an all-female ensemble, drummer Terri Lyne Carrington (b. 1965) said,

I would just like to make a suggestion that we shift to talking about music and not about women. I know that’s part of your thing, but none of us think about being a woman when we play. We already said that, but I’ll reiterate—none of us think about being a woman when we play or write songs or do all the other work that has to be done to organize even just a project like this. Nobody thinks about that part of it. If that makes other people attracted to it, that’s fine with me, but I think in the end we’re doing what we have to do. (Pellegrinelli, 2010)

Her rather strong statement shows her frustration with a moderator who tries to elicit the participants’ opinions about being women in jazz. I encountered similar reactions when I conducted fieldwork in New York City, interviewing female jazz saxophonists for my dissertation. Some women insisted that they never think of their gender or race when they play music, and they were uncomfortable with talking about gender in relation to jazz. One woman even refused to be interviewed when I told her that my project focuses on female saxophonists. In contrast, others had no problems talking about music in terms of gender. In addition, these different views sometimes coexisted within a single individual.

This paper discusses how female jazz instrumentalists perform gender while talking about gender in the context of jazz. I encountered Judith Butler’s notion of gender as a norm, I argue that these women’s different attitudes embody different types of gender performance. I am most interested in those women who insist that they never think of being a woman. I consider these women to be performing gender without norms. Further, I will explore why they choose to do this type of gender performance, which, I suggest, would keep the existing gender norms unchanged.

In Undoing Gender, Judith Butler extends her notion of gender performativity by suggesting that gender is a norm. She writes, “Gender is the mechanism by which notions of masculine and feminine are produced and naturalized” (Butler, 2004, p. 42). Gender as a norm is constantly constructed and normalized by our performances as well as regulates our notions of masculine and feminine. These notions of masculine and feminine permeate things around us. In other words, gender as a norm produces many gender norms in different areas of our lives including music. These gender norms, however, are so naturalized that we often are not aware of them. Yet, we are constantly performing gender based on these norms. When some female instrumentalists say that they never think of gender while playing or composing music, they are still performing gender by staying aloof from assumptions of the gender norms of people, music genre, and instrumentation.

For my dissertation project, I interviewed thirty female jazz saxophonists. Interviews, mostly conducted between July 2008 and October 2010 in New York City, were partially structured with open-ended questions. Although I had prepared a set of questions, conversations sometimes took unexpected directions, which resulted in adding, skipping, and modifying some questions. There were questions that did not directly address the issues of gender, such as, “How did you start playing the saxophone?” and “What do you wear when you perform publicly?” I also asked gender-related questions including, “Were there many girls playing the saxophone when you started to play?” and “What are some advantages and disadvantages of being a female jazz saxophonist?” These questions evoked a wide array of response.

In the initial stage of my dissertation project, I was more interested in how women play jazz saxophone—their sound, improvisation and delivery style, and choice of songs—and how they present themselves when they perform in public—their clothing, make-up, hair style, and stage demeanor—all of which are part of their gender performance. As the project progressed, however, I was intrigued by how my informants talked about music and gender, how they interacted with me, and how they made sense of their life as female jazz saxophonists, which highlighted multiple subjectivities in both of us. In the process of our conversation, they constructed and presented themselves to me, a Japanese woman, an ethnomusicologist and a jazz saxophonist living in the US. Therefore, their statements represented their
gender performances at that moment in a specific context. I felt that my subjectivities, being a female jazz musician and non-American, often positively worked while interacting with my informants, which brought out their candid feelings and ideas. My informants and I discussed gender, race, and jazz in many different contexts, and they expressed a wide variety of views.

I will first present some women who were not hesitant to talk about gender in the context of jazz performance. Their statements reveal gender norms in jazz even when they are not aware of these norms. For example, Carol Sudhalter (b. 1943) mentioned to me, “I didn’t even know that women could play saxophone” (Sudhalter, 2009). She started to play the flute while she was at Smith College majoring in botany. She chose the flute because she thought it would “be something lightweight that a woman could play” (Sudhalter, 2009). Thinking that her father would not have approved of her playing the saxophone, she would not pick up the tenor saxophone until after his death in 1975. She told the author W. Royal Stokes, “My feeling about the bari [saxophone] was that it expressed my female energy, where the tenor [saxophone] expressed my male energy” (Stokes, 2005, p. 31) When I asked her to elaborate this statement, Sudhalter told me that she feels like a man when she plays tenor saxophone although she emphasized that her feeling is personal and may not be shared by other female saxophonists. Her statements clearly show her notions of masculinity and femininity regarding jazz saxophone performance.

Several interviewees mentioned that middle school was one of the deciding points regarding what instrument one should play. For example, alto saxophonist Katja Endemann (b. 1974) commented on the subject from her experience as a jazz educator in high school:

When it comes to jazz, one big thing I notice with my students too is that…we have to take a big risk in a solo, women don’t like it too much, and they’re worried about messing up, they want to be neat and prepared, they’re comfortable when they have a written out music. (Endemann, 2009)

Alto saxophonist Tia Fuller (b. 1976), who did not have any problem talking about her views and experiences in relation to gender, also talked about improvisation. Fuller notices that men and women have different attitudes in improvising, which, she thinks, derive from the way boys and girls are raised. She said,

When we were young children, outside, you’d always see the little boys playing in the dirt, you’d always see them lighting stuff on fire, experimenting, and really just being extremely spontaneous. But usually we’re in a house, playing with Barbies… being safer, unless we were tomboys. I really think that from that being ingrained in us subconsciously at an early age, that carries through our role as quote-unquote a woman or a “lady.” A “lady” is not supposed to set on fire, a “lady” is not supposed to be experimental, run up the tree, jump off, break a
leg, or whatever. It’s more accepted for a man. Then, in particular, dealing with jazz, you have this language that is extremely experimental. … And a lot of times, women are not supposed to do that or women are turned away from that. (Fuller, 2008)

Here, Fuller uses the word “experimenting,” referring to the experimental and spontaneous aspects of jazz improvisation. She attributes different behaviors of men and women to the society and culture in which we are raised. Fuller’s notion of “our role as a woman or a lady” strongly suggests a prevalent idea of gender roles in society. Gender roles can function as gender norms although they can also be gender stereotypes when they are based on ignorance. Elements involved in improvising—being experimental, spontaneous, and risky—are part of gender norms that are associated with masculinity.

Some women talked about expressive aspects of jazz performance in relation to gender. Alto saxophonist Sharel Cassity, in her early thirties, stated, “Women tend not to show their delicate side because it’s so stereotyped. Some people just hear you doing that and say; oh she’s weak or something” (Cassity, 2009). She explained how her fellow alto saxophonist Jaleel Shaw sounded gentle and delicate in his ballad playing at the performance with the Roy Haynes band she saw the night before the interview:

I would love to play like that, but someone would say, ‘Can you put a little more oomph behind it next time?’ ‘Can you try a little harder?’ I get that a lot from bandleaders. They always think I’m hesitant or afraid. A lot of times, I’d like to leave more space. I don’t like to dominate everything all the time. But they think that they need to push me to do that [play aggressively] because I’m a woman and I’m probably very timid. It’s like a funny thing. So when I show up on some gigs, even women bandleaders say, ‘I want more, I want more, come out the gate burning!’ I know I have to get up there and burn, play loud, and take over. It’s OK but in a perfect world, I can just show up and play like myself. I don’t think that it’s timid or bad to be feminine. I think that’s taken as a weakness. (Cassity, 2009)

Cassity’s statement demonstrates that she sometimes performs “masculinity” because of the expectation from bandleaders.

Similarly, alto saxophonist Karolina Strassmayer (b. 1971) thinks that women, including herself, tend to be uncomfortable with the “feminine” music making. She stated,

For me, it has been the issue how comfortable I am with soft side, with the lyrical and romantic side. I think, it depends on how comfortable you are with going to that place that is more vulnerable, it may not be as impressive to people at first. So the more I become comfortable with who I am, the more I can go to that place, the more I can write something just pretty or lyrical. Being comfortable with more vulnerable approach to music is not about proving that you can do it, or just wanting to wow people. (Strassmayer, 2009)

Strassmayer suggests that “feminine” approaches to music are vulnerable because it would not impress people in the way “masculine,” virtuosic playing would do. She continued,

So I think, if I can make a general statement for women in jazz, we can be a lot more comfortable with the feminine side, we can expand a lot more in that direction. I think it would enrich the music, and it would enrich our personal lives, too. (Strassmayer, 2009)

Although the “feminine” can be considered negative in jazz performance, Strassmayer sees the positive in it and wants to embrace it.

Further, Tia Fuller attributes positive feminine qualities to women’s bodies. Discussing advantages of being a female jazz musician, Fuller said,

What is the most important of what I’ve experienced, because my quartet is all female, there’s a certain connection that playing with other women that are also accomplished. Like you can call it an innate connection, an internal connection we have with each other. It’s the same thing as Beyonce’s band, we are connected in a very special way. It’s in a way that I’m not
really able to express, but I know what it is because I can feel it. I don’t know if it’s an ability to give birth. There is something that is extremely special that I really think it’s an advantage of being a woman because we are able to feel in different places, not to say that men can’t but I think we are very in tune with our bodies because we menstruate every month, our sexual organs are internal, and theirs are external, so it’s gonna be different. (Fuller, 2008)

Her positive interpretation of the female body in music performance is rather unique, and it resonates with cultural feminist ideas in which undervalued women’s attributes are revalidated (Alcoff, 1988, p. 407-410). Similar to what feminist writers Mary Daly and Adrienne Rich advocated in the late 1970s, Fuller values the female body without espousing biological essentialism.

On the other hand, some women I interviewed seemed to be uncomfortable when I raised issues of gender in the context of jazz. Alto saxophonist Lakecia Benjamin, in her late twenties, told me flat out at the beginning of the interview, “I don’t think it matters what gender or race you are.” Then she asserted, “I never even thought about I’m a woman. It was until I started getting gigs, [when] people are like, ‘I’ve never seen a woman play like that.’ I was like, kind of reminded, ‘Oh I guess I’m a woman.’ I didn’t really think about it. Growing up, there were a lot of Hispanics in my neighborhood in the Bronx. All the Hispanic girls were doing something else and all the friends I played music [with] were men, I just naturally was always with men, so I never even thought that I’m the only girl, it never occurred to me. I would just go to hang out at the clubs all night and play. It was probably my advantage that it never registered. I wasn’t raised in the way that women don’t go out. I was able to do whatever I wanted to do. My friends were already men. I didn’t feel uncomfortable. I’m always around men. It didn’t register until I got older. (Benjamin, 2009)

This statement demonstrates that Benjamin is now aware of the gender norms: typically, women do not play the saxophone so well and do not go out late at night and hang out with men at the clubs. However, she had comfortably situated herself where the norms do not exist because she grew up unaware of the norms. This worked in favor of her, as she mentioned, since she never felt uncomfortable with interacting with men.

Israeli-born tenor saxophonist/clarinetist Anat Cohen (b. 1976) constantly denied me, whenever I hinted at the association of musical elements with gender. For instance, responding to my question, “Have you felt that you are expected to play in a certain way to be accepted as a jazz musician?” she asserted, “Yes, [I’m expected to] play good. But if you are asking if I was expected to be playing like a man, then, no. I always want to play just what the music asks for.” Then she continued, “I am proud to be a woman who plays music. But when it comes to the music, I don’t think about it as gender” (Cohen, 2009). She seems to feel strongly that music is gender neutral, and she has never thought of gender when she performs music.

Alto and soprano saxophonist Sue Terry’s (b. 1959) attitude is also noteworthy. She never overtly expressed discomfort or disagreement when I associated music with gender. She calmly answered all my questions but skillfully avoided the association. For example, when I asked her about how she dresses for her public performances, she replied, “I don’t wear skirts when I perform. I know women who wear skirts when they perform, because they wear skirts, but I’m not a skirt wearer. I own two skirts” (Terry, 2008). While some women told me that they consciously choose to wear pants at their public jazz saxophone performances in order not to stand out on the bandstand, Terry seemed to be suggesting that her choice of pants has nothing to do with gender norms in jazz. In addition, answering my question, “Have you had any difficulties with other female instrumentalists?” she said, “No, I don’t have difficulties with other musicians” (Terry, 2008). By purposely omitting “female,” she demonstrates that performers’ gender is irrelevant to her in the context of jazz.

Gender performances vary in contexts and change in time. For example, although at one point during our conversation she happily shared her marketing strategy as a female jazz instrumentalist,
Erica von Kleist (b. 1982) does not think about her gender when she is “on the bandstand” and believes gender to be irrelevant in music performance. Meanwhile when interviewed by Ted Panken in 1999, baritone saxophonist Claire Daly (b. 1958) said, “A saxophonist friend recently paid me the ultimate compliment. He said, ‘You sound like an old guy!’” I said, ‘Man, that’s the nicest thing anybody has ever said to me’” (Panken, 1999, p. 50). Her comment suggests the association of good jazz performances with old men. In contrast, during the interview in 2009, answering my question, “Do you think jazz performance has masculine or feminine sides?” Daly stated, “I don’t think actual music itself has a gender or race, or anything else. I think it’s audio. I don’t know about all that stuff” (Daly, 2009). Her attitude toward gender—her gender performance—clearly differs at these two moments. There are various factors or combination of these to explain this: her experience in ten years may have changed her views on gender and race; she may have reacted differently due to the nature of these two interviews (one is journalistic, the other is academic); the interviewer’s identity (one is white, American, male, journalist, the other is Asian, non-American, female, saxophonist/researcher) may have brought a different reaction out of her. In her response to me, Daly completely dismissed music’s association with gender and race, as well as to negated music to be part of gender norms.

Why do these women perform gender without norms? Some might claim that it is simply because music has no gender. Their performance of ignoring gender norms is obviously a reflection of their belief that music is gender neutral. Admittedly, musical sound itself has no gender, and I am not suggesting that gender is a set of attributes of men and women that naturally emerges in their musical performance. Instead, gender is a norm that constantly shapes and regulates notions of femininity and masculinity within musical performance. Of course, these women’s gender performances shown above are diverse, and their intentions can vary.

Performing gender without norms can be one way of their rejection to being categorized into “women” in the context of jazz. This is clearly seen in the case of a round table discussion I quoted at the beginning of this paper. Moderated by NPR reporter Lara Pellegrinelli, they discussed Terri Lyne Carrington’s all-female project as well as gender stereotyping, role models, and the participants’ experiences as female jazz musicians. The transcription of the discussion shows that Carrington made the quoted statement when the moderator asked these women’s opinions about structured organizations, competitions, and festivals as well as informal networks to help female musicians and offer them the opportunities to be heard. It seems that Carrington did not want her all female project to be understood as a typical “women in jazz” project that she and some female jazz instrumentalists had avoided. For example, trumpeter Ingrid Jensen (b. 1966), one of the collaborators of Carrington’s Mosaic Project stated in the round table discussion:

When Terri emailed me I was glad that I was free to do this. Which is very rare. If anyone knows me, they know that I avoid all women groups like the plague because I’ve had enough experiences where the weakest links overpower the integrity of the music. … So in this situation, when I saw all of the names of the people involved and Terri said in the email that she really wanted me to be a part of it, I knew right away that it was going to be something very, very important and special. (Pellegrinelli, 2010)

This statement demonstrates that Jensen considers this project is different from other all-female bands because of these specific women involved. In other words, she feels that the women on this recording are exceptionally good jazz musicians unlike the women in most other all women groups. These “exceptional” women want to be labeled as jazz musicians instead of as “female” jazz musicians. They want to belong to the professional jazz scene instead of the “women in jazz” scene. It seems as though for some women, the association with the “women in jazz” scene would diminish their achievement and success as a jazz musician.

Their attitude of refusing the category of women in jazz resonates with a post-feminist view Angela McRobbie explains in regards to recent popular and political culture. She states,

Under this new gender regime, popular and political discourse is repeatedly framed along the
lines of female individualization. Rather than stressing collectivity or the concerns of women per se, this replaces feminism with competition, ambition, meritocracy, and the rise of the ‘alpha girl.’ (McRobbie, 2011, p. 181)

Like some contemporary young women who do not identify themselves as feminists, these female jazz instrumentalists disassociate themselves from the separate category of “women in jazz” and want to be recognized for their individual talent and merit.

Of course, their gender performance without norms can be closely related to their actual music performance experiences. Here, James Currie’s idea of “music’s potential indifference” (Currie, p. 167) in his analysis of the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra with which Edward Said and Daniel Barenboim were involved in 1999 may shed light on these female instrumentalists’ attitude. The West-Eastern Divan Orchestra consisted of young musicians from Syria, Jordan, the Palestinian territories, Israel, Egypt, and Lebanon. Despite the initial tensions among them over their ethnic identities regarding music as well as international politics at the time they became a uniform orchestra in ten days as Said describes, “one set of identities was superseded by another set” (Barenboim & Said, 2002, p. 9). Commenting on this situation, Currie suggests,

…they had to interrupt the normal functioning of their political and cultural inscriptions, and to a degree, let the clothing by which they are usually identified drop to the floor in order to adopt a certain uniform(ity). (Currie, 2012, p. 164)

Citing some other examples, Currie demonstrates that intensely focused musical performance can produce indifference that is not simple avoidance. The intense engagement with musical performance can create a state of indifference to musicians’ “episteme (who they conceived themselves to be)” (ibid.). Like the young musicians in the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, female jazz instrumentalists would become jazz instrumentalists, as some women claimed, while deeply engaging in musical performance. However, as Currie suggests, “their epistemic identity is not permanently erased” (ibid.), their other sets of identities including gender cannot be completely neglected.

In some cases, performing gender without norms can be their survival strategy. In other words, it shows their conviction that gender should have no effects on their life as a jazz musician. Therefore, they consciously or unconsciously neglect or avoid thinking about gender norms in jazz and choose not to talk about them. Some women also feel that not talking about gender and not paying attention to a performer’s gender at all would improve the situation. During the roundtable discussion mentioned above, Dutch saxophonist Tineke Postma (b. 1978) stated,

As long as the media keeps on emphasizing the female thing, you keep on putting a stamp on it. If we just emphasize the person, then maybe it will get less special, being a female artist. Then you’re just an artist. (Pellegrinelli, 2010)

Similarly, a number of women I interviewed lamented that most of the interviews focus more on their gender than on their music. Does focusing on music and completely ignoring issues of gender help to deconstruct gender norms in jazz? I would suggest otherwise. It would bury the norms and preserve them unexamined, conforming to the longstanding masculinist discourse. Therefore, contrary to their intentions, these women’s gender performance without norms would result in keeping the existing gender norms intact. In such a situation, the gender norms within jazz are unchanged, and a small number of talented and successful female instrumentalists remain “exceptional women,” who are better than most other women confined to the realm of “women in jazz.” I suggest that recognizing and critically examining gender norms instead of ignoring them can help to deconstruct the separate category of “women in jazz” as well as gender norms in the jazz world.

References


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