“Where Are All The Girls?” Women In Collegiate Instrumental Jazz

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Abstract: This qualitative study was undertaken to answer a question posed by a visiting high school musician who, after sitting-in with a college jazz ensemble, noted that she was the only girl in the room. Three undergraduate women music majors were selected for this study. Each was an instrumentalist, had an extensive background in jazz at the high school level and had withdrawn from college jazz bands after the freshman year. Individual and focus group interviews with the participants revealed that each of the three had made conscious choices that led to their withdrawal from the jazz program. Analysis of the data revealed the following themes: (1) a lack of female role models and mentoring in jazz; (2) pressure to perform both classical and jazz and (3) a negative environment sometimes associated with jazz ensembles. These factors led the students to make choices based on self-assessment and gendered expectations for success.
Introduction
Each spring, a mid-western university music department invites the best high school instrumentalists from the area to a ‘Festival of Winds and Strings.’ The purpose of the weekend gathering is to recruit high school students and to give them an opportunity to play challenging literature. As part of the recruitment mission, I take the bass players to "sit in" with the top jazz ensemble. One of the visiting bassists sight-read a very difficult part with the band. Returning to her seat, she leaned over and asked, "Where are all the girls?" I looked around and noticed that, of the thirty musicians and teachers in the room, she and I were the only women. I had no answer for her.

Her question prompted me to begin counting the number of women involved in jazz at the University. At a recent concert, 13 of the 53 participants were women. There were no women in the premier jazz ensemble or the student combos. As a member of the faculty combo, I was the only woman to improvise a solo that evening. Young women are common in high school ensembles. Each year there is a new infusion of freshman women into our ensembles and a year later most of them are gone. Why are there so few women in the academic jazz setting and why is it so easy for them to leave jazz behind?

Review Of The Literature
Little has been written concerning gender issues in jazz education. Several sources have chronicled the historical importance of professional women in jazz performance (Porter, 1984; Dahl, 1984; McGee, 1994). Becker (1963) described the insulated world of the professional jazz musician. Green (1997) explored the relationship between gender, improvisation and jazz. Porter (1989), Tracy (1990) and Marquis (1998) have written about jazz in academia. Leonhard (1991) reported the under-representation of women instrumental directors in the public schools. Gould (1992a) summarized the historical role of women in secondary and college teaching. Weaver (1994) and Payne (1996) reported the number of women teaching at the college level.

The absence of women in jazz is often linked to instrumentation. Considerable research has been conducted linking gender stereotypes to specific instruments (Abeles and Porter, 1978; Griswold and Chrback, 1981; Delzell and Leppla, 1992; Zervoudakes and Tanur, 1994; Haack, 1998). Gould (1992b) and Delzell (1994) have described the effects of gender, role models and stereotyping on career options in music education. Eccles (1987) linked women’s choices to gendered expectations for success.

Context
The university music department chosen for this study is designated a mid-sized, master’s degree-granting department by the National Association of Schools of Music (NASM). The majority of the undergraduates are music education majors. Of the current 143 undergraduate students, 60% (86) are female. The faculty of 16 includes five women and 11 men. The full-time faculty women teach in the trumpet, oboe, double bass, voice and piano studios.

The university has offered student jazz ensembles since the early 1970’s. These ensembles are treated as adjunct to the other, more traditional performing groups. Students are required to be in two major ensembles each semester. If they choose to participate in jazz, it is in addition to their regular course load. The university’s large scholarship budget, controlled by the ensemble directors and studio teachers, facilitates player recruitment for the major ensembles. Recently, the department expanded the jazz program with the addition of a director of jazz studies.

Jazz Studies
Jazz I is an audition-only ensemble made up of the best and most focused players on campus. The average enrollment is 20, and in recent years the number of women has ranged from zero to three. Jazz II emphasizes pedagogy and is the training ensemble for Jazz I. On average, women comprise 30% of the enrollment. Vocal Jazz, an ensemble of chamber singers and rhythm section is also available. Six of the eleven current members are female. The jazz improvisation courses comprise a four-semester sequence designed to take students through the basics of improvisation. In the six semesters the courses have been offered, only one woman has participated.

There is also a well established "jam scene" centered on the university community. Two local clubs sponsor weekly jams that are open to all. The student union and several businesses hire student jazz combos on a regular basis.

The Participants
After observing the available jazz courses, I interviewed the two jazz ensemble directors for
background information and chose three female participants for the study. All three were sophomores at the time of this study. They had similar backgrounds in jazz, having played at least three years in a high school jazz program. Each participated in Jazz II during their freshman year and migrated to Vocal Jazz during the sophomore year. All three regularly attended jam sessions, but seldom played. The women were each academically and musically gifted and focused on specific career goals. All names used in this study are pseudonyms.

Ruby, a piano performance major received both academic and music scholarships. Her high school jazz program was considered one of the finest in the state. Her private teacher described her as a "piano jock" because of her willingness to practice four to five hours per day. As a freshman, she discovered an interest in ethnomusicology and was awarded a grant to study indigenous music in New Guinea.

Juanita, a percussionist, began her freshman year as a music major but switched to a business major with a music minor. She also earned both academic and music scholarships. Her main focus in high school was jazz. She played drum set exclusively until she arrived at the university. The transition for her was difficult: "I swing all the eighth notes I’m not supposed to."

Ella was a music education major on a music scholarship. Her major instrument was oboe, but she also played sax and sang with Vocal Jazz. Ella was a very confident young woman, not afraid to mix it up with her male colleagues.

Methodology
This qualitative project spanned a four-month period. My role was as a participant observer and I was the primary instrument of data gathering (Creswell, 1994). Data was gathered from a variety of sources. Departmental records including class rosters, music major listings, and ensemble personnel lists were reviewed to determine women participation over the preceding five years. Jazz ensemble rehearsals were observed and interviews held with the ensemble directors to explore the nature of the rehearsal context. Individual interviews and a focus group session were held with the three main participants. A semi-structured interview format was used in the interview, with questions focusing on the girls’ experiences, goals, and role models. Discussion in the focus group was led by the participants themselves.

Observation/Interview Log
A constant comparison method was used throughout the data gathering process to recognize emerging themes. Data were organized and coded first into general categories and later into families, in an attempt to understand what I was seeing and hearing (Bogdan & Biklin, 1998). Group interviews were also conducted (Devault, 1990). As data were gathered, theory was formulated based on the emergent themes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Finally, the resultant theory from this study was tied to existing models.

Themes
Data analysis revealed four themes. First, the women could not connect jazz to their career aspirations. Each identified clear role models, but none in the jazz idiom. Second, the students spoke of the pressures of fulfilling the requirements of their major instrument. Third, each participant repeatedly mentioned the importance of a positive, non-judgmental and nurturing environment with an emphasis on the social aspects of playing. Finally, each participant had a clear understanding of her skills and what it would take to become proficient in jazz. Each made a conscious decision to limit her involvement in jazz.

Role Models
Both ensemble directors interviewed noted that the lack of female role models in the professional jazz ranks was the primary reason young women do not pursue jazz. The Director of Jazz Studies stated that, historically, women have not been welcomed into the jazz world: "Certainly, at some point, and this may be true today, but definitely through the swing and bebop era, women were discouraged. So without good role models, it’s hard for women to identify with the idiom." The historical attitude of male jazz musicians may carry over to the current generation of players. The instructor describes the attitude of some of the young men: "[They] think Diana Krall is OK because she plays piano and she’s a babe, but if you’re going to be improvising . . . guys do that."

Each of the women interviewed identified a clear career goal. Ruby wanted to teach piano at the college level: "I can see myself very happy in that role. I’ve
talked to my studio teacher] about that and she agrees that I would be good at that." She saw the value of jazz, not for its own sake, but because it would make her more marketable. She could not identify any female role models in jazz.

Juanita wanted to work for the university cultural affairs office as a prelude to work in music business: "Right now, I want to be in arts management, like handling contracts for musicians. I worked with [the program director] last year and I really like what she does." Asked if she had role models in music, she cited percussionist Sheila E. and a composer/arranger she saw at a jazz festival: "She was up there conducting the band, playing her pieces. It was the coolest thing. I wanna be the chick up there with the baton." She could not recall the woman's name.

Ella wanted to be a music educator, like her father. "I can see myself doing what my Dad does. He gets to play in the city orchestra and this little jazz band and he gets to do that he wants to do." When pressed about her dreams and aspirations, she said, "I want to be famous, singing in a little club with a backup group." Asked why she doesn't pursue that, she replied, "I'll probably get a teaching job somewhere before I'll get a job playing or singing." She could only identify Ella Fitzgerald as a possible role model.

The Pressure To Perform

Because the Music Department follows a mainstream approach to music, students are required to study their instrument in a traditional manner. Background interviews with the two directors pointed to studio support. The Jazz II Director stated, "In freshman year they [the girls] are all enthusiastic and then their teachers want them to specialize." Those studios taught by faculty with jazz backgrounds tend to encourage their students to remain in the jazz program. Both Ruby and Ella study with women faculty members who have no background in jazz.

Ruby felt that there was little time for jazz: "I've played in jazz choir, but I haven't practiced it and I haven't grown at all. She [her studio teacher and advisor] has been pushing me really hard and I was very much into classical. Like all these pressures from all sides and I didn't have time for jazz and I didn't want to have time for jazz. It was more frustrating than fun." She was rethinking her involvement in the Vocal Jazz rhythm section. "I'm resentful of the whole jazz choir thing, because it's not inspiring at all and I'm mostly just doing it out of a sense of obligation."

Juanita had a different story. She had never studied percussion formally before coming to the university and she did not enjoy "the classical thing." She continued to be a member of the percussion ensemble and had written an arrangement for the group. She, like Ruby, felt pressue to play in ensembles: "There's just too much pressure. 'Juanita play, Juanita play,' and then negative feedback afterwards. I just wanted to play."

Ella's studio teacher was supportive but insistent that she focus on the oboe. They had some discussion about her interest in jazz: "When I told her I was not going to be in jazz band, she said, 'Well now you have more time to make reeds.' I told her I was going to be in jazz choir and she said, 'OK as long as [you] make reeds.' "

Click to hear "Send in the Clowns." Ella's self-directed jazz band at work.

The Creative Environment

Each participant described how personally satisfying and creative jazz could be. Common to these positive experiences was the social aspect of playing music, positive feedback and lack of pressure. Ruby described her early school experience as: "Great fun, I loved it. We had structure, but we also had room. In high school I was playing with my really good friends. Maybe it was that we were comfortable with one another and we weren't afraid to give out new ideas. We were all pretty naive. Oooh, jazz, it's cool. We'll play jazz."

Juanita did not have a similar high school story. Her band was very competitive: "My high school was very picky, but none of us knew enough to be picky. If somebody played a wrong note at festival, then they were in the dog house all the way home." She did cite two more recent, positive experiences. She played set with a group of "old guys" who treated her with respect and were "so laid back." She played at a local jam: "I loved the informality of it. I didn't feel like it was a performance. We didn't know how to do it. Just do it, don't worry about it."

Ella enjoyed her high school experience: "It was fun. It was so cool. Socially, it was pretty good." She also enjoyed singing at local jams and recalled a
student group that had met the previous year. "We all got together and played and it was so fun," she said.

The Negative Environment

My follow-up question to each of the students was "What is it like now?" Interestingly, none of the women mentioned negativity during individual interviews. It was only when they were together in the focus group that they shared their stories. Ella described the reactions of the better players: "If some big hot shot doesn’t give you something helpful or some feedback, like ‘Oh well, they must not think very highly if they don’t think enough to say anything.’" I pressed her for a specific instance of criticisms: "No, it’s what they don’t say. Sometimes the kids in Jazz I look down on people. They can’t compliment because they are too good. Because, if I say she did a good job, then she’ll think she’s better than me." She summed up her theory on why girls quit: "I think it’s because girls can’t cut it. I don’t know if they are discouraged when they were first starting out to play jazz or what but someone along the line said, ‘Well, you’re a girl and you’re not going to make it as a jazz player.’ The line is that guys are meant to be in jazz and not girls."

Juanita described the negativity this way: "It never seems to come in the form of advice. It is criticism. On the critiquing thing, the egos involved in music are such, it seems as though they never have anything good to say. If you’ve done something good they aren’t going to tell you because it will look like they are below you to tell you the something good after a concert. They tell you the things you could work on."

Ruby did not offer any negative stories. "All the jazz guys have been really supportive," she says. A male friend, one of the top players in the program, told her that playing jazz would enhance her classical playing. He also offered his help: "I need someone to teach me to play jazz. The information is overwhelming. [He] has an open ended offer when I am ready to sit down and work on this stuff." Ella contrasted her negative jazz experiences with a story from her first university symphony performance: "I came in like two measures early on a solo and the orchestra people just laughed about it. It’s all right. If that would have happened in a more serious jazz thing, they would have been, ‘Dude, you screwed up.’ Like laughing at you, not laughing with you." In a background interview, the Director of Jazz Studies described the atmosphere commonly found in rehearsals: "There are two languages spoken in jazz ensemble, music and sarcasm." Asked if he ever tones it down, he replied, "About once a week, but if you don’t do well with sarcasm …"

Self-Assessment And Choice

Each of the women interviewed assessed her skill level and knows, in her own mind, what is necessary to be a proficient jazz player. Each believed that she is responsible for her own success or failure. Each of the women interviewed believed that playing well in a jazz setting was possible, but that it would require effort on her part. I posed a theory to them that some people are too self-aware and are reluctant to take chances while others don’t recognize their limitations and "just do it." All three identified with the first category.

Ruby does not participate in jams. "My standards are too high, I’m too much of a perfectionist. I know exactly how much time it’s going to take and if I play it I don’t just want to kind of play it and be OK. I’d like to really know what I am doing." She was more comfortable with the highly structured learning process associated with classical playing: "I think I know how to fix things better. I know how to practice and if somebody tells me I’m doing something wrong then I know how to fix it."

Juanita was also very aware of her skill level: "Do I feel crappy about myself now and then? Yes. That’s been a natural thing for me ever since high school. I get mad at myself for not trying harder, doing better. Not practicing enough. So, I never blame it on other people being mean to me to make me feel bad. I always come back to myself. I’m not doing enough."

Ella believes her lack of effort was the reason she dropped Jazz II: "I got tired of not working on jazz in jazz band and I never put as much effort into it as I wished I could have. A little voice in the back of my head kept saying, ‘If you practiced your saxophone, you’d do a whole lot better in jazz ensemble.’"

Theoretical Model

I began this study with preconceived ideas based on my own undergraduate experiences. My assumptions were that the women involved would cite overt hostility, possible negative reactions from their studio teachers or negative experiences with the
ensemble directors. Reality, as portrayed by these women, was much more subtle and complex. Each woman was goal-oriented and realistic about her chances of success. Each constantly re-evaluated her participation in jazz. Each chose between spending time and energy on jazz and other activities that could be directly applied to career goals. In making that choice, the women considered three major areas of concern.

First, the three participants could not identify specific role models in jazz by name. The absence of role models is not surprising given the small number of women in the professional jazz world and in academic jazz. Interestingly, the two students who had strong female role models could not see a connection between gender, role models and career choices.

Second, students felt the pressure to study their major instruments in the traditional manner. This pressure was partially the result of instrument choices made in elementary school. As predicted by Abeles and Porter (1978), choices made in fourth grade can impact career decisions. All three students experienced tension with their studio teachers, but they felt that those demands were in their own best interest and willingly accepted the consequences. The tension between jazz and traditional programs at the college level is well documented. (Porter, 1989; Tracy, 1990; Marquis, 1998). The participants in this study, like most jazz students, were caught between two different systems.

Third, all three spoke about the need for a positive and worthwhile learning environment. Two of the three described negativity from male students, but they felt it was more a constant irritant than anything overt. The negativity may be a part of the greater jazz culture whose members attempt to separate themselves from others. Becker (1963) writes:

> The musician is conceived of as an artist who possesses a mysterious artistic gift setting him apart from of other people. Possessing this gift, he should be free from control by the outsiders who lack it. The gift is something which cannot be acquired through education; the outsider, therefore, can never become a member of the group (p. 86).

While the students claimed not to be effected by the negativity, their actions indicate otherwise. All three had chosen to remain in the only jazz ensemble dominated by women; the one with the least competitive environment. Women may value social ties more than achievement. Conversely, men of the same age tend to value achievement and competition (Eccles, 1987).

Ultimately, it is clear from their own words that these women were not forced out of academic jazz, but made decisions that lead to limited involvement. In trying to interpret these decisions I looked to Jacquelynne Eccles’ model which "Links occupational choices to expectations for success and subjective task value" (Eccles, 1987 p. 135). Eccles counters the idea that women make choices based on lack of self-esteem or confidence. Instead, men and women make different choices because they have different goals and definitions of success.

Eccles indicates choices are made based on an expectation of success. These choices may be between two or more positives, not necessarily a positive and a negative. Women may avoid male dominated fields because they not only have to prove their abilities, but may also have to deal with discrimination. Women may also have a more realistic view of their own abilities: "It is possible that females are as confident as males in their ability to succeed but assume that it will take more work, time and/or effort to succeed than their male peers assume if will take." (Eccles, 1987, p. 146) The women in this study demonstrated great self-awareness and each felt that they had made a rational decision. Choosing a career in jazz would be to leap into uncharted waters. Given that both paths would be rewarding, it seemed prudent to choose the path that seemed most attainable.

Considerations For College And Public School Jazz Programs

Given the options, it is little wonder that many women choose not to continue in jazz programs. Unfortunately, opting out can impact future employment opportunities. The majority of secondary instrumental directors are male (Leonhard, 1991). This imbalance is sometimes attributed to the fact that most high school band directors are expected to lead a jazz ensemble. If female music education majors choose not to participate in jazz programs, they fail to fully
prepare themselves for high school positions (Gould, 1992; Delzell, 1994). We perpetuate the imbalance by allowing so many future educators to walk away from jazz programs. In the college ranks, women jazz educators are rare (Payne, 1996) at a time when prospective faculty who can play and teach in both the classical and jazz genres are considered quite marketable.

Encouraging girls to play jazz should begin in the elementary grades. Students should be encouraged to explore instrument choices outside the traditional sex stereotypes. Junior high and high school programs should continue to encourage students to participate in jazz ensembles and improvisation classes, expanding their programs to include instruments not traditionally associated with jazz ensembles.

The problem at the college level is more difficult. All students should be encouraged to continue an interest in jazz. Doing so, however, requires the cooperation of instructors in traditional studios and ensembles. Jazz directors should also look to expand the instrumentation of their ensembles and improvisation classes to include instruments traditionally played by women. Jazz educators should strive to challenge students while offering a creative, nurturing environment, an atmosphere, "where social and musical trust have developed" (Lamb, 1996, p.129). Finally, more work needs to be done promoting those women professionals who can act as role model and mentors to student musicians.

Conclusion

While women are common in art music and most popular music genres, the jazz world remains predominately male. College has become the primary training ground for jazz musicians and the teachers of future jazz musicians. If college programs cannot do a better job of recruiting and keeping women instrumentalists, jazz will continue to be a male-dominated field. The three women in this study demonstrate that it is an easy choice to leave jazz behind. Colleges can do a better job of adapting jazz programs to the needs of women, providing mentoring and role models, encouraging a positive environment and allowing students the opportunity to achieve in both traditional and jazz performance.

References


