

Women in music

Going beyond the image

Everyone loves a talented women musician but what lies behind getting this talent exposed. **Ceri Moelwyn-Hughes** explores some of the hidden barriers and prejudices that women musicians have to contend with.

When I watched Ken Burns' film *Jazz*, I was intrigued to learn the story of how Ella Fitzgerald's musical career began.

Like Billie Holiday, Fitzgerald had a bleak and troubled childhood. Born illegitimate, Fitzgerald was abused by her stepfather and her mother died when she was 14. She ran away to New York where for nearly two years she was homeless and supported herself by being a lookout for a brothel, and singing and dancing for tips. In November 1934, then 16 years old, Fitzgerald entered an amateur show at the Apollo Theatre in Harlem. Despite her awkward and unglamorous appearance, her singing won over the audience and she was awarded the first prize. This should have been a week's work at the theatre, but the Apollo's manager did not think that she was pretty enough. Granted neither the prize nor remuneration, she returned to the streets, merely entering other amateur shows and singing without pay for local bands.

Meanwhile, the resident bandleader at the Savoy, Chick Webb, was looking for a beautiful girl to front his orchestra to help him achieve the fame he sought beyond the Savoy. He gave his vocalist, Charles Linton, the task of scouring New York's clubs for her,

and Linton discovered Ella Fitzgerald. Webb's reaction was: "You're not putting that on my bandstand." Linton threatened to quit if she was not given a chance, and Webb finally relented. Linda Dahl records in her book *Stormy Weather* that according to legend Webb convinced his manager by saying: "Listen to her voice, don't look at her."

Soon Webb's orchestra with Ella Fitzgerald appeared on the best bandstands in America and had hit after hit on the jukebox. By 1937, *Downbeat* and *Metronome* magazines heralded Fitzgerald as America's Number One jazz vocalist, and by the age of 19 she was billed as the 'First Lady of Swing'. After Webb died in 1939, his band stayed together, and respecting Fitzgerald as an equal, changed its name to *Ella Fitzgerald and her Famous Orchestra*.

Ella Fitzgerald's story reveals an important issue that has confronted many female musicians: the popular expectation that women on stage should be glamorous, attractive and sexually appealing. Not all women musicians are all these things.

For many women musicians, like Fitzgerald, their looks may not be what gave them the limelight first, yet they have nonetheless triumphed artistically and

commercially. Think for instance of Cesaria Evora: barefoot (and deliberately so as a statement about poverty in her country, Cape Verde, and in solidarity with her people), squint, fat and no longer young, she has achieved international fame and recognition in later life.

On the other hand, the iconic beauty, style and individuality of women musicians like Billie Holiday and Miriam Makeba are as memorable today as the profound contributions they have made to music. The point I wish to make here is that a public often expects a female artist's looks and behaviour to be quite as important as her artistic talent. This is often not only unfair and unthinking, but also unkind: people need to think about and challenge such issues more often. This is why I am conducting research into the experiences and perceptions of women musicians in South Africa.

EXPERIENCE AS WOMAN MUSICIAN

My route to this research is that I am a saxophonist who performs and teaches music, so that I have experienced the pressures of being a woman musician. I have also spoken with and watched many other women musicians.

In my own career I gradually became aware that the appearance



Cesaria Evora



Ella Fitzgerald

and personality of women musicians can be different from the expectations people place on them. I have participated in local music as a performing saxophonist in jazz, pop and African bands, a gospel band, theatre work, session playing and in the classical music settings of symphonic and chamber performances. My own experience of some frustrations as a woman instrumentalist led me to reflect on some of the ways in which women musicians are expected to look and even behave.

Here are some examples. In my first theatre engagement, I was instructed to wear false eyelashes and a glittery, incredibly short skirt. Young, shy and grateful for the work, I obliged.

Years later in another theatre production, I was hired to deputise for another female saxophonist. With little notice and no rehearsal, I successfully navigated my way musically through all the songs and solos, only to be reprimanded by the management afterwards for not being sexy enough on stage. With a little help from my friends, I adapted my clothes and movements on stage, and the production company continued to offer me jobs for years afterwards. Yet the realisation that my concern with the music, paramount to me, was not the focus of the management or

the audience was profound.

Very often I have been the only female member of a band, and there have been times when I felt extra pressure as a woman to 'prove' myself in a line of work dominated by men, a sentiment echoed by the experiences of other female instrumentalists I have interviewed. Several times I have been given the hearty approval of colleagues: "Don't take it the wrong way, but you don't play like a girl. You play with balls!" This is a compliment given generously, but one that always leaves me reeling internally, wondering why the reference point of accomplishment for a musician is only ever masculine?

To be fair to those male musicians, women instrumentalists remain in the minority, even today. Until as recently as the 1970s, one seldom saw women instrumentalists in jazz or popular music. Last year I performed in a revue musical where female singers were dressed in stylish period dresses, but as the only woman in the band, I was given a man's tuxedo to wear and asked to remove my earrings and slick back my hair. This comment is not a criticism of the production, but given simply to highlight how historically in jazz and popular music, singing and playing the piano were regarded as acceptably feminine for women.

There have been women instrumentalists in jazz, like pianists Lil Hardin Armstrong in the United States and Emily Motsieloa in South Africa, but they have been few. Perhaps, like Armstrong and Motsieloa, they were accepted because they were married to bandleaders? Musicians like American trumpeter Valaida Snow and South African saxophonist Lynette Leeuw are little remembered.

WOMEN MUSICIANS' NEEDS

My stories show how my experience has led into researching the experience of other women musicians to reveal areas where improved relationships and circumstances could develop.

To do this I have interviewed a great many women musicians, heard their experiences, and discussed with them important aspects of women's experience as musicians. These discussions are confidential, but from them it is possible to see what matters to women so that their needs and difficulties can be recognised more clearly. For example, many women are also home-makers and mothers, and support to help these women manage their homes and their jobs could improve. Being or not being supported and encouraged in personal and professional



Billie Holiday



Brenda Fassie

relationships is often crucial to women, but can be exacerbating in a musical career because of the creative demands and awkward hours.

Another important concern for the women musicians whom I have interviewed is the need for equal access to education and resources. While there are now more female instrumentalists, arrangers, composers and musical directors working professionally in South Africa, women remain in the minority in music industry. They take up roles such as managing, producing and sound engineering, a situation paralleled in jazz and popular music elsewhere.

The point of my research is to raise these questions: Why is this so? What could change to better allow women to function as musicians and artists? Women are constantly seeking to reach behind the barriers of the roles that have traditionally been set for them by a patriarchal society.

Many women currently working as musicians in South Africa are managing and taking control of their professional lives and are making an impact on music in this country. They are showing that their strength as people is equal to that of the men that so often employ them. In doing so they are often improving gender relations and

their professional situations.

Yet in sharing their experiences, many of the women I interviewed articulated an on-going struggle against sexism that is not easily talked about in public. At the extreme end of these experiences, far too many of these women speak of sexual harassment and rape suffered because of tensions in their profession. This brings into question whether South Africa's progressive Bill of Rights and constitutional attempts to eradicate marginalisation in institutional, corporate, industrial and social settings, has filtered through to women's lived experiences.

Musicians like Dolly Rathebe and Billie Holiday contended with the darker aspects of being sexually desirable, but they were also the focus of racial and cultural pride. When history has revered such women, it has never been only because they were beautiful, but because they made unforgettable art. Wynton Marsalis poignantly said of Holiday: "When you hear Billie Holiday sing, you hear the spirit... (and) fire of the blues shouter, you have that intelligence of the choice of notes... and a very profound sensitivity to the human condition. She tells you something about the pain of the blues, of life, but inside of that pain is toughness, and that's what you're attracted to."

We may presume that ultimately the artistry and creativity of women musicians will prevail, but perhaps a deeper awareness and understanding of some of the issues that concern women working professionally in the music industry may help change existing attitudes, and may prevent future absences and silences of women. Brenda Fassie, controversial and acclaimed in equal measure, summed up the pressures facing women musicians when she said: "I'm always looked at, but I'm never looked into."

The issues that I have raised in this article are intended to appeal for a greater sense of equality, for equal opportunities and, above all, respect. Surely the idea of treating women in the music world sensibly, thoughtfully and with consideration is not so far fetched? And beyond the music world too! Would the world not be poorer if Linton and Webb had not taken a chance on Ella Fitzgerald? LB

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