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To the Beat of Brilliance: The Life and Legacy of Viola Smith

By Sarah Shumate



Photograph of Viola Smith in 1941 by James J. Kriegsmann.¹

¹ James J. Kriegsmann, “Viola and her 17 drums,” c. 1941, Public domain. Reprinted in Alex Vadukul, “Viola Smith, ‘Fastest Girl Drummer in the World,’ Dies at 107,” *The New York Times*, November 6, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/06/arts/music/viola-smith-dead.html>.

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Viola Smith (1912–2020) was a prolific and vivacious musician who made a powerful impact on the world of music and sought to create equal opportunities for female musicians during her time. She lived for a spectacular 107 years, playing and performing music for the majority of her life.² Her musical family and her own love for music served to launch her into a career as one of the first professional female drummers of the time, gaining countless accolades across the nation.³ Her musical skills as a drummer and the vibrant energy that sparked every performance were paralleled by few in her era and arguably even beyond it. She left a legacy of passion through her music.

The joy of music is something that brings an unmatched vibrance and vitality to life. It has often been said that music keeps the soul young and Viola Smith was living proof of that. Her life was filled with music, from childhood to well beyond her 100th birthday. She was known as “the fastest girl drummer in the world” and this was easily observable in her phenomenal skill and passion for the drums.⁴ Very few women were professional musicians at the time, not due to lack of talent, but simply because of a lack of opportunity. Viola Smith sought to create change and leave a legacy beyond just the music she played. Her story is one of a phenomenal musician and woman who lived an extraordinary life.

² Katerina P., “106-Year-Old Woman Has Been Drumming for 80 Years, and She's Still Got It,” *Thinking Humanity*, April 15, 2019, <https://www.thinkinghumanity.com/2019/04/106-year-old-woman-has-been-drumming-for-80-years-and-shes-still-got-it.html>.

³ Vadukul.

⁴ Adam Bernstein, “Viola Smith, Swing Era’s ‘Fastest Girl Drummer in the World,’ Dies at 107,” *The Washington Post*, October 23, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/obituaries/viola-smith-swing-eras-fastest-girl-drummer-in-the-world-dies-at-107/2020/10/23/770c3758-154a-11eb-bc10-40b25382f1be_story.html.

From Hometown to Hollywood

Viola Smith was drawn toward music from the start. Born Viola Clara Schmitz on November 29, 1912, in Mount Calvary, Wisconsin, she was encouraged to pursue music early on.⁵ Her father was a musician himself and made sure that each of his children had the opportunity for music education. Each of the children, including Viola, took piano lessons.⁶ They had two pianos and an organ so it is not difficult to imagine the music that must have constantly filled their home. In addition to piano lessons, all of the children were also encouraged to learn other instruments so that they could create a family jazz band, later called the Schmitz Sisters Orchestra.⁷ Since she was the sixth child of ten, most of the instruments were already played by her older sisters when she entered the band, but her father decided that it was time to add drums. Smith considered this to be a lucky break saying later in her life, “What better instrument is there to play than the drums?”⁸ Whether it is considered a coincidence or a divinely orchestrated turn of events, it is clear that this allowed her to truly find her passion and make an indelible mark on the world of music.

⁵ Bernstein.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Vadukul.

⁸ *Tom Tom Magazine*, “Viola Smith: America’s Original Hep Girl,” YouTube, 14:06, January 31, 2013, <https://youtu.be/jlzCWHw7ZW8>.

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The Schmitz Sisters Orchestra (ca. 1920). Courtesy of the Mills Music Library.⁹

The band of sisters was a great success and performed locally in vaudeville tours and state fairs. Before long, Smith and her seven sisters were in great demand at weddings and other events, but this was just the beginning of the fame that she would achieve. Soon, the group’s talent matched and even superseded that of the best. They traveled frequently to Chicago for radio gigs where they even outplayed an all-male band in their rendition of the classic *Rhapsody in Blue*.¹⁰ A year-long national tour sponsored by a talent contest followed and their fame spread throughout the country. After many of the sisters branched off into marriage and other pursuits, Smith and her sister Mildred (1916–1997), a multi-instrumentalist herself, formed the Coquettes,

⁹ “Schmitz Sisters Orchestra,” ca. 1920, Wisconsin: Mills Music Library, *Mills Music Library Digital Collection*, <https://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/XLJODS6DMXQQG8L>.

¹⁰ Cree McCree, “Pioneering Drummer Viola Smith Was ‘An Advocate For The Rights Of All Women Musicians,’” *DownBeat Magazine*, November 13, 2020, <https://downbeat.com/news/detail/pioneering-drummer-viola-smith-was-an-advocate-for-the-rights-of-all-women>.

another all-girl big band.¹¹ This band was quite successful and toured for about four years.

Smith eventually moved to New York where her compelling talent earned her a scholarship to the Juilliard School. There she studied timpani under Ed Fischer, a top drummer and educator.¹² She also studied at Radio City Music Hall under Billy Gladstone (1893–1961), one of the most famous jazz drummers in America.¹³ Perfecting her style and her skill, Smith became an established performing musician in New York and one of the first female drummers in America to have a professional career in the field. Many referred to her as “the female Gene Krupa” but Smith replied to this in utmost humility and simply acknowledged that all of them were skillful in their own right.¹⁴

At one point, Smith was performing in five shows a day, seven days a week, for about two months at New York’s Paramount Theatre. During this time, one day rang out in her memory as one of the most difficult in her entire life. On June 6, 1942, Smith’s fiancé was taken overseas and her father passed away, leaving her to cope with immense loss and still carry on through five shows that day. She nearly fainted during a performance because of the shock but was brought back into the moment at a fellow bandmate’s cue in time for her drum solo. In that moment, she remembers that her heart was pounding as fast as her drums.¹⁵

One of Smith’s most infamous accomplishments is her performance in the Kit-Kat band for the original 1966 Broadway production of *Cabaret*, which she considered “the highlight of

¹¹ “Viola Smith,” Oral History Program: Viola Smith, NAMM.org, National Association of Music Merchants, October 23, 2012, <https://www.namm.org/library/oral-history/viola-smith>.

¹² *Tom Tom Magazine*.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

[her] life.”¹⁶ She also began her own band called Viola and Her Seventeen Drums in addition to having an extended career playing with the House of Charm Orchestra, a popular all-girl band at the time.¹⁷ Smith made myriad appearances on the *Ed Sullivan Show* and performed for many other notable bands and events as well.¹⁸ She played alongside some of the most famous big-bands in America during the 1949 presidential inauguration of Harry Truman (1884–1972), including Count Basie (1904–1984), Duke Ellington (1899–1974), Phil Spitalny (1890–1970), and Benny Goodman (1909–1986).¹⁹ Other notable achievements include her performances for the NBC Symphony Orchestra, various Hollywood film orchestras (such as the one for the film *Here Come the Co-eds* (1945) directed by Jean Yarbrough and starring Bud Abbott and Lou Costello), and with other jazz greats such as Ella Fitzgerald (1917–1996) and Billie Holiday (1915–1959). She continued to play and perform until well into her 90s.²⁰

Stereotypes and Spotlights

Viola Smith was one of the very few women who had the opportunity to pursue music as a career. Women were unfortunately and inaccurately viewed as less than their male peers in the big-band arena where men were thought to have more stamina and skill. However, this was clearly not the case, as can be seen by Smith’s performance abilities and that of numerous other women. Smith sought to change this state of inequality and prejudice by writing an article for *Down Beat Magazine* titled “Give Girl Musicians a Break!” in 1941. In this article, she boldly stated, “Some girl musicians are as much masters of their instruments as are male musicians. They can improvise, their solos

¹⁶ *Tom Tom Magazine*; Vadukul.

¹⁷ McCree.

¹⁸ Vadukul.

¹⁹ *Tom Tom Magazine*.

²⁰ McCree.

are well-defined and thought-provoking and show unlimited imagination.”²¹ She passionately defended the talents of her fellow women musicians and urged her readers to consider the immense vault of talent and skill that was left untapped and smothered under the stereotypes of society.

With a large majority of men drafted in the war, including male musicians, someone had to fill their place. Smith unabashedly asked, “Instead of replacing them with what may be mediocre talent, why not let some of the great girl musicians of the country take their places?”²² World War II finally opened up an opportunity for women to demonstrate that they could perform on the same level as their male counterparts. As Smith stated in an interview with *Tom Tom Magazine*, “since all the men were getting drafted overseas, any girl musician who wanted a job could have one” and that was “wonderful for musicians.”²³ A great deal of work still needed to be done in the following decades, but Smith helped to spearhead this call for change and was a passionate advocate for equality in the music field.

Longevity and Legacy

Viola Smith lived a long and fruitful life and credited her astounding longevity predominantly to her drumming, since it involved the whole body and kept her in terrific physical condition.²⁴ In 2012, she moved to a Christian commune in Costa Mesa where she resided until her peaceful passing in October of 2020, due to Alzheimer’s complications.²⁵

Viola Smith was not driven by a thirst for fame but simply by her deep love for music and drumming. When she did discover her popularity and renown across the internet and even the world,

²¹ McCree.

²² Ibid.

²³ *Tom Tom Magazine*.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Bernstein.

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she was shocked and claimed that it was quite a surprise saying, “I’m happy that I’m accepted as a girl drummer, because at the time there was no such thing.”²⁶ Her story is a testament to the joy that flows from music. She considered her life to be quite “charmed” and not too difficult saying, “Unless people call drumming work, then I worked hard in my life.”²⁷

Viola Smith had a legendary career and was known on a national scale, not only for her incredible skill behind the kit but for her impact in creating greater equality and opportunities for women musicians in her field. Although she retired in her sixties, she kept drumming well after she turned one hundred.²⁸ Viola Smith was a maverick in her era and beyond it. Her pioneering spirit and unmatched talent inspired countless other women to pursue their passions for music.

²⁶ *Tom Tom Magazine*.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ McCree.

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Author Bio

Sarah Shumate is an undergraduate student pursuing a Bachelor of Arts in Music Education at California State University, San Bernardino. After completing her degree, she intends to join a credential program and pursue a master's degree in music as well. Her ultimate goal is to complete a doctoral degree and teach at the university level. She is drawn toward music education because it inspires kids to be creative and experience the joy of music. Sarah also has a passion for writing, design, and multimedia art. She hopes to one day release an album of her original works and publish children's books, compilations of her poetry, and possibly even a novel or two. She wants to use her passions to glorify God and seeks to weave her creativity and faith together.

