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The Hidden Voices: Peggy Gilbert and The International Sweethearts of Rhythm

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The Hidden Voices:
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Introduction

From the 1920s through the 1960s female jazz musicians, including the soloist Peggy Gilbert and the band the International Sweethearts of Rhythm, struggled with sexism and racism. I chose to focus on these women because, although they contributed significantly to jazz, their work was largely discredited in their beginning performances.¹ Sexism and racism at this time in the United States, especially the southern United States, polluted the public view of women and of female jazz musicians. Because jazz was interpreted as a male artform², women had to contend with sexism and racism in order to perform jazz.³ It is only in the 21st century that the United States listeners have begun to uncover the talent of women. Sexism and racism suppressed their voices stopping them from becoming jazz greats in the 1920s-60s. Because of Peggy Gilbert and The International Sweethearts of Rhythm's substantial contributions to jazz and to women's rights, these statuesque women should be regarded as pivotal figures in jazz history.

Historical Context

Sexism

Talya Valenti, the author of "A Survey to Investigate the Participation of Female Jazz-Trained Instrumentalists at WAAPA and in Perth's Professional Music Scene" sought to understand why female participation in jazz was lower than male participation in jazz. Valenti states that, "By far, the main genre that women instrumentalists are underrepresented in is jazz."⁴ When the genre of jazz emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, women were

¹ *ibid.*

² Talya Valenti, "A Survey to Investigate the Participation of Female Jazz-Trained Instrumentalists at WAAPA and in Perth's Professional Music Scene," (Edith Cowan University: Research Online, 2018)

³ Valenti, "A Survey to Investigate the Participation of Female Jazz-Trained Instrumentalist at WAAPA and in Perth's Professional Music Scene," 8.

⁴ *ibid.*

bound to the societal standard of being housewives, that is, a woman who only cares about the home and the needs of her husband.⁵ Julie Human, the author of “A Woman Rebels? Gender Roles in 1930s Motion Pictures,” states that, “An acceptable woman was a dutiful wife cleaning the house, cooking the meals, and rearing the children.”⁶ Valenti continues with the fact that, “A submissive wife had no voice in the home and on the male dominated stage of jazz.”⁷ It was difficult for women to break away from this preconceived identity and perform in the male-dominated field of jazz.

Women were given a chance to perform once men went off to fight in World War II. Valenti describes that, “Women were able to be immersed in the jazz experience and in work opportunities when men fought in World War II. During the duration of the war, 1939-45, women were not respected in these positions.⁸ Once men came back from the war, women were expected to regain their previous role of housewife throughout the 1950s-60s.”⁹ This greatly affected the continuation of female jazz musicians’s careers. In Jayne Caudwell's work, “The Jazz-Sport Analogue: Passing Notes on Gender and Sexuality,” citing Linda Dahl, she states that “instrumental improvisation means assertiveness which means masculinity.”¹⁰ In other words, playing and expressing one’s voice in music was deemed as too masculine for female participation.¹¹

⁵ The freedoms of the 1920s came to a screeching halt with the financial crisis of the Great Depression. History.com Editors, “Great Depression History,” (A&E Television Networks, 2009).

⁶ Men experienced an identity crisis because they were no longer able to provide for their families. Consequently, women who were able to find work outside of the home experienced resentment from men. Over seventy-five percent of Americans believed that a woman’s place was in the home. Julie Human, “A Woman Rebels? Gender Roles in 1930s Motion Pictures,” (*The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 98, 4, 2000), 405–408.

⁷ Valenti, “A Survey to Investigate the Participation of Female Jazz-Trained Instrumentalist at WAAPA and in Perth's Professional Music Scene,” 10.

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ *ibid.*

Women were viewed as subservient admirers and the men were the active and superior artists in Jazz.¹² Sherrie Tucker, the author of “Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies,” challenged how women were depicted in jazz history by searching for the female perspective. Tucker states that “women were invisible because they were depicted as not good enough. Playing good enough meant playing like a man. Women who play like men are 'exceptional women' and can enter the discourse...”¹³ Women who represented the playing qualities of men, such as brash, confident, and technically proficient qualities, were the only female performers who were somewhat respected. Peggy Gilbert and the International Sweethearts of Rhythm were included on this list of women that were somewhat respected.¹⁴

Women were also eroticized in jazz music as they were eroticized in society. Women were for the service of men allowing for the sexualization of the female body in society and in jazz music. According to “Sexual Objectification of Women: Advances to Theory and Research”, “Sexual Objectification Theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) postulates that many women are sexually objectified and treated as an object to be valued for its use. S.O. occurs when a woman’s body or body parts are singled out and separated from her as a person and she is viewed primarily as a physical object of male sexual desire” (Bartky, 1990).¹⁵ Because of this theory, female jazz musicians were not primarily appreciated for their talents. These women were objectified for their bodies and thus it was difficult for them to be respected for their talents.

¹² Regretfully, a woman could not perform to the level of a man according to society. A woman was viewed as only being able to handle simple literature and informal performances. # Historically, with these gender barriers, American women have had limited visibility. Michele Aichele, “Women in Music - Overcoming Obstacles and Taking Career Control,” (Liberty Park Music, 2018).

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ Szymansk, Dawn M., Lauren B. Moffitt, and Erica R. Carr, “Sexual Objectification of Women: Advances to Theory and Research,” (*The Counseling Psychologist* 39, 2011), 6-7.

Men were also sexualized in jazz music and they could perform with sensual undertones but, even when this occurred, they were still respected and appreciated for their talents. In contrast, women were not as respected for their talents and were primarily viewed as sexual objects for men.¹⁶ Robert Glasper, a famous jazz pianist, infamously stated that “Getting back to women...They don't love a whole lot of soloing. When you hit that groove and stay there, it's like a musical clitoris...the women's eyes close and they start to sway, going into a trance.”¹⁷ In this quote, the woman's talent is lessened and she is a sexual object. This woman's talent and expression is discredited and is now a sexual musing for Glasper. Many women were viewed as an object of a man's desire, which limited their voice in jazz.¹⁸ These sexist limitations on women in jazz hurt the careers of female musicians who had to fight every day to continue performing.

Racism

The civil rights movement in the south influenced the African American jazz movement. The violence and pain the African American people experienced during this movement was what fueled the emotion in jazz.¹⁹ For example, they suffered the effects of the Jim Crow laws which allowed for the segregation of schools, parks, drinking fountains, restaurants, and restrooms. Each public space had specific places for whites and African Americans. This process was meant to maintain segregation between the races.²⁰ From this segregation, jazz became a segregated genre with Caucasian performers receiving more performing experience. The works of

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ Zola Phillips, “The Social Effects of Jazz,” (CUNY, 2017).

²⁰ From these laws, the African American people could not use the facilities of white people, could not live in the towns of white people, go to the same schools as white people, interracial marriage was illegal, and the African American people could not vote because they could not pass the voter literacy test. History.com Editors, “Civil Rights Movement,” (A&E Television Networks, 2009).

Caucasians were marketed to everyone while African American music was limited to other African American listeners. African Americans were also limited in their performing options through restricted venue opportunities. This segregation caused jazz performed by Caucasians to be promoted more than African American jazz.²¹

The Intersection of Sexism and Racism

African American female jazz musicians in the United States had to contend with the combined effects of sexism and racism.²² With many African Americans still viewed as less than human in the South, it was difficult for an African American to be respected in society. With innate disrespect for the African American people, sexism for African American women was intensified. Where white women may have had a chance of performing in the south, African American women were largely excluded.²³ White women were viewed as demure and innocent while African American women were viewed as aggressive and impure.²⁴ There was a fabricated narrative of a lack of civility among African American female musicians. This narrative shaped the belief that African American women were a disruptive part of the jazz process.²⁵ Excluding African American women from the creative process was just a way of limiting their opportunities and restricting their voice in jazz.²⁶

African American women, while traveling with men, also had to be hyper-aware of how to coexist in a male dominated environment. The African American woman, according to the jazz artist Melba Liston, had to be aware of, “1) the vulnerability of the black female body; 2) the

²¹ *ibid.*

²² History.com Editors, “Civil Rights Movement,” (A&E Television Networks, 2009).

²³ Tammy L. Kernodle, “Black Women Working Together: Jazz, Gender, and the Politics of Validation,” (*Black Music Research Journal* 34, 1, 2014), 27–55.

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ *ibid.*

²⁶ *ibid.*

devaluation of the black female body within certain cultural/social spheres; 3) how the presence of the African American female body in male-centered spaces could be read as promoting a type of sexual currency that disrupted the power/social relationships among men”²⁷ Melba Liston experienced sexual violence on these trips with men. As a female trombonist, Liston was viewed as robbing a man of a trombone playing opportunity. The men were threatened by the fact that a woman took their role, and in a search for dominance, they would rape her.²⁸

Melba Liston remembers her invitation to Dizzy Gillespie's band. Dizzy said:

Get the band together, but include Melba, and Melba is to write some of the music.” “Those were the orders without question. But when I got to New York I heard some comments, about, “Why the hell did he send to California for a bitch trombone player?” They didn't know me at all, but as Dizzy instructed, I arranged some things and brought them with me, “Stella by Starlight” and “Anitra's Dance.” . . . When we got into the initial rehearsals and they started playing my arrangements, well, that erased all the little bullshit, you see. They say, “Mama's all right.” Then I was “Mama, I was not bitch no more.”²⁹

Through Liston's talent, she became more respected. Male musicians had inherent respect while women had to earn what reduced amounts of respect they could.³⁰

The degradation of not just women, but African American women, is further explained by the jazz pianist Bud Powell's wife, Buttercup. Buttercup in one of her writings states, “The juxtaposition between the “woman” and the “bitch” and the male jazz musician is further

²⁷ *ibid.*

²⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ Women who accepted jazz positions were viewed as compromising the creative process of men. Women were meant to serve as a supporting role to men's success. If a woman was the person in power the derogatory term bitch was used. Men feared women becoming successful. If women were successful and powerful then women could no longer be controlled. Women would have potential above their housewife status and this would disrupt the societal structure. Women had to be put into their place and reminded that men were superior beings. Kernodle, “Black Women Working Together: Jazz, Gender, and the Politics of Validation,” 7.

complicated when race is considered.”³¹ White women were better respected and were afforded more opportunities when compared to African American women. African American women were also more commonly regarded as a “bitch.” Liston, *The International Sweethearts of Rhythm*, and multiple other women had to navigate these gender and racial stereotypes which society defined them by.³²

Peggy Gilbert

Peggy Gilbert, known for saxophone ability, was a leader in the jazz world. She did not get there without a struggle. Gilbert struggled with the gender constructs that limited her performing opportunities. No matter how well Gilbert performed, she was still labeled as inferior.³³ It was not until the late twentieth century that she was regarded as a valid jazz musician. Gilbert always believed that



women should have been equal to men in the jazz space. Through her eight-decade career, Gilbert supported and mentored many female musicians. This helped to bridge the gap between female and male musicians in jazz.³⁵

Music historian, Jeannie Pool, states, “If [Peggy Gilbert] had been a man, she would have been considered one of the great American bandleaders,” but the jazz culture, “kept dismissing girl players as a novelty act, a freak show.”³⁶ This sexist sentiment continued with a 1938 article

³¹ *ibid.*

³² *ibid.*

³³ Linda Rapp, “Gilbert, Peggy (1905-2007),” (Glbtc Inc, 2015).

³⁴ Will Wyse, *Peggy Gilbert and Her Girls*, (CSUN University Library, 2015).

³⁵ Rapp, “Gilbert, Peggy (1905-2007),” 7.

³⁶ *ibid.*

by Down Beat magazine entitled, “Why Women Musicians Are Inferior.” Gilbert responded with an article of her own that explained the discrimination female performers face. The magazine published the article with the condescending title, “How Can You Blow a Horn with a Brassiere?” This led Gilbert to be a national advocate for female jazz musicians.³⁷ According to Pool, female musicians came from everywhere to thank her for her support. Unfortunately, the majority of female opportunities for jazz careers were dismissed once men came home from war.³⁸

The end of World War II brought many male musicians back into the spotlight. According to Rapp, employment opportunities for women in jazz began to disappear. Because of this decline, Gilbert took a full-time position as a secretary for the Local 47 of the Musicians Union. Gilbert continued to play as many gigs as possible while working.³⁹ Gilbert continued with her constant support for women. Music historian Pool states, “Peggy became the chief advocate for women musicians.” Pool continues, “She worked hard to get them jobs and restart their careers. When you see all those musicals, like the Busby Berkeley productions, it was Peggy who got them the jobs.”⁴⁰ This exhibits that Gilbert cared as much for other women’s careers as she did for her own. Gilbert was constantly devoted to furthering opportunities for female jazz musicians.

Gilbert retired from the union in 1970 but remained on the Board of Trustees. Gilbert continued her support of women by contributing to the column “Tuning in on Femme Musicians” in the union’s publication, *The Overture*.⁴¹ Gilbert’s retirement was filled with continued performances as a jazz artist. In 1974, Gilbert founded The Dixie Belles. This was a

³⁷ *ibid.*

³⁸ *ibid.*

³⁹ *ibid.*

⁴⁰ *ibid.*

⁴¹ *ibid.*

band composed of women in their 60s and 70s.⁴² This group performed in a wide variety of venues including festivals, clubs, parties, and television programs. According to Rapp, the Dixie Belles performed on The Tonight Show starring Johnny Carson in 1981. This televised performance led to professional appearances on The Golden Girls, Father Murphy, Dharma and Greg, Married with Children, Home



Improvement, Madame's Place, and Ellen.⁴³ The Dixie Belles were incredibly influential because there were very few all-female jazz groups, especially a group of women this age. The Dixie Belles successfully recorded one album entitled *Dixieland Jazz* in 1986 and continued performing together until 1994.⁴⁵

Gilbert's influence appears in many commercials for companies including Coca-Cola, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Toyota, and Ultimate Electronics. Gilbert is also the subject of a documentary and biography by Jeannie Pool, *The Peggy Gilbert Story: American Jazz Band Leader, Saxophone Player and Advocate for Women Musicians*. Through her contributions to jazz and women's rights, Gilbert's legacy lives on.⁴⁶ Peggy Gilbert continued her love of music even amid her encounters with sexism. Her art would continually be discredited as a novelty act, but she still had a successful career. In response to this sexism, Gilbert spent her life fighting for the equality of women in jazz and never quit performing.⁴⁷

⁴² *ibid.*

⁴³ Rahul Sharma, *The Dixie Belles*, (Alchetron, 2018).

⁴⁴ *ibid.*

⁴⁵ *ibid.*

⁴⁶ *ibid.*

⁴⁷ *ibid.*

Music

Peggy Gilbert performed with great talent in jazz music. Through her influence, many women were able to perform jazz.⁴⁸ There were many sexist critics of her work, but Gilbert still fought against the societal pressure to become a housewife.⁴⁹ Gilbert continued to perform during the Great Depression even with limited money, less accolades, and restrictive gender norms.⁵⁰ There was resentment in the Great Depression when women received jobs over men because of limited job opportunities. Because of this resentment, the role of housewife became standard for women in the United States, especially in the south.⁵¹

Peggy Gilbert's most influential album was, *Peggy Gilbert and The Dixie Belles: Dixieland Jazz*. This is Gilbert's most influential album because it is her last album, thus, it defines her jazz legacy.⁵² The first song I will mention is, "Back Home Again in Indiana." In this song, Gilbert introduced the Dixieland style of jazz. Up to this point in history, this genre was not widely explored by women.⁵³ Gilbert was able to fully explore Dixieland jazz and add her own playing style in the process, becoming a trailblazer for other female artists in this genre.⁵⁴

In Dixieland jazz, each instrument has a unique role. The trumpet plays the melody; the clarinet adds embellishments to the melody; the trombone embellishes the bass line, sometimes plays the melody, and does after beats and sound effects; the piano and banjo play chords; the

⁴⁸ *ibid.*

⁴⁹ *ibid.*

⁵⁰ Music was perceived differently during this time. Music was not a fun pastime, it was a way to forget the bleak reality of the Great Depression. Music was a form of escapism. Claudia Reinhardt, "Having Fun--Jazz" (Wessels, 2003).

⁵¹ Julie Human, "A Woman Rebels? Gender Roles in 1930s Motion Pictures," (*The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 98, 4, 2000), 405–408.

⁵² "Dixieland and the Swing Era," (Jazz in America, 2007).

⁵³ Dixieland jazz is different from the swing style of jazz. Dixieland had its musical development in the early 20th century, 1900-1928. Dixieland had four main influences: ragtime, military brass bands, the blues, and gospel music. The common instrumentation for a Dixieland band is trumpet, clarinet, trombone, piano, string bass, drums, and banjo. The main musical aspect of Dixieland Jazz is something called "collective improvisation." Where in regular jazz there are multiple singular solos; in Dixieland jazz, all musicians improvise at the same time. "Dixieland and the Swing Era," 3.

⁵⁴ *ibid.*

string bass plays the bass line; and the drums keep the beat and swing feel throughout.⁵⁵

Dixieland jazz also has the characteristic of bending the notes to exhibit emotion in the music.

The vibrato was fast and the notes were bent aggressively. This meant that the pitch was lowered quickly and with strength.⁵⁶ The standard of Dixieland jazz originated in small marching bands which often played at dances, parties, and funerals. Louis Armstrong was the first to improvise in the Dixieland jazz style and make it mainstream. Gilbert broke from the traditional swing style widely played by women and embraced this new Dixieland jazz style.⁵⁷

If Gilbert had not been a woman, she may have been known as one of the Dixieland greats.⁵⁸ Gilbert used her struggles with sexism as the inspiration to create her art.⁵⁹ Some unique characteristics in the song, “Back Home Again in Indiana,” include the utilization of a baritone saxophone solo. Baritone saxophone solos were not common in the Dixieland jazz style.⁶⁰ There are also many solos including: the clarinet, trumpet, baritone (bari) saxophone, and piano. This is uncommon because in Dixieland jazz collective solos are more common. At the end of the piece, the bari saxophone takes the lead. This is unusual for the style because the trumpet usually takes the lead part. The piece ending in a bari saxophone solo is also uncommon because Dixieland jazz ends in one large collective solo.⁶¹ Gilbert is the bari saxophone soloist throughout. She alters the common lead trumpet role and creates her own musical narrative.

Women were rarely afforded the right to their own voice in jazz so Gilbert was a trailblazer for

⁵⁵ *ibid.*

⁵⁶ *ibid.*

⁵⁷ *ibid.*

⁵⁸ *ibid.*

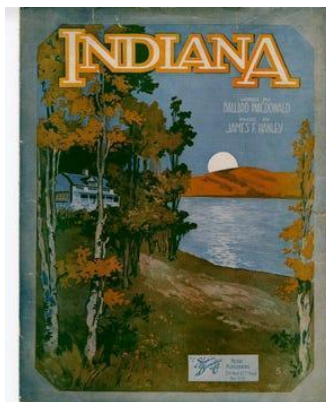
⁵⁹ Domenica Bongiovanni, “Indy 500: The Surprising History of ‘(Back Home Again in) Indiana’ & Everyone Who Sang It,” (The Indianapolis Star, 2021).

⁶⁰ Bongiovanni, “Indy 500: The Surprising History of ‘(Back Home Again in) Indiana’ & Everyone Who Sang It,” 5.

⁶¹ *ibid.*

female jazz artists. Many women were not allowed to perform, but Gilbert performed despite the odds against her.⁶²

“Back Home Again in Indiana,” was originally titled “Indiana.”⁶³ James F. Hanley wrote “Indiana” to support his home state and his state song, “On the Banks of the Wabash.” “Indiana” was one of the biggest hits for the composer. Louis Armstrong was the performer to first make “Indiana” a staple song.⁶⁴ Through Louis Armstrong's influence, Gilbert was then able to perform her own version of Dixieland jazz. It was bold for a woman to perform a song made primarily famous by a man.⁶⁵ Gilbert knew that she would be compared to ⁶⁶ Armstrong and accepted the judgment and ridicule that ensued.⁶⁷



Gilbert continues to exhibit her talent and strength in the song “When the Saints Go Marching In,” which is also from the album, *Peggy Gilbert and The Dixie Belles: Dixieland Jazz*. This song has the same unique characteristics that are in “Back Home Again in Indiana”⁶⁸ Gilbert shines with the clarinet and bari saxophone solos throughout. Every line Gilbert plays proves that gender should never be a determining factor. Gilbert performs jazz masterfully just like the Dixieland great, Louis Armstrong. “When the Saints Go Marching In”⁶⁹ was recorded originally May 13, 1938 and topped the charts for four weeks. Armstrong yet again evolved this

⁶² *ibid.*

⁶³ *ibid.*

⁶⁴ *ibid.*

⁶⁵ *ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Indiana, 1917, (Indiana Historical Society, 2006).*

⁶⁷ *ibid.*

⁶⁸ *ibid.*

⁶⁹ “When the Saints Go Marching In” is attributed to James M. Black and Katherine E. Purvis. Both composers were associated with the church. Louis Armstrong made the song famous but the composers were the reason for the song's existence. Purvis was a music teacher for the seminary and Black was a worship and Sunday school leader. Black would also write and edit worship songs. “When Saints Are Marching In” should not be confused with “When the Saints Go Marching In.”

song into a jazz standard and it is now a very common request of Dixieland Jazz bands.⁷⁰ Gilbert, yet again, boldly took a song that was broadly popularized by a man and made it her own.

Gilbert continues her influence on Dixieland jazz with the song, “Struttin’ with Some Barbecue.”

The unique characteristics of “Struttin’ with Some Barbecue” are the same unique characteristics that are in the previous songs. Dixieland jazz is also mostly based on instrumentation and not the voice. Hence, the addition of a vocalist is unique. Gilbert always shines with the clarinet and bari saxophone solos throughout every piece as well.⁷¹ “Struttin’ with Some Barbeque” was originally composed by Lil Hardin Armstrong in 1927 as an instrumental work. Lyrics were added in 1941 by Don Raye.⁷² When Lil Hardin Armstrong divorced Louis Armstrong, she won ownership of this song. Louis Armstrong continued to claim ownership of this song, despite the court giving ownership to Lil Hardin.⁷³ The men in the 1940s-60s were acclimated to having full control and power over women. The fact that a woman owned the song was unheard of and thus ignored by Armstrong. Lil Hardin, through this sexism, remained determined and kept control of her song.⁷⁴ Like Lil Hardin, Gilbert maintained control in each song she performed.

Gilbert continues to develop this tenacity and talent in the song, “When You’re Smiling,” once again, shares the same unique qualities as the previous songs.⁷⁵ Gilbert’s solo on the bari saxophone leads the listener through a fun and unique ballad. The piece is meant to make the listener smile with upbeat rhythms and fluttering vibrato.⁷⁶ “When You’re Smiling” was composed by Mark Fisher, Larry Shay, and Joe Goodwin.⁷⁷ Again, Louis Armstrong made this

⁷⁰ Sandra Burlingame, “When the Saints Go Marching In,” (JazzStandards, 2005).

⁷¹ “Struttin’ with Some Barbecue: Stories of Standards,” (KUVO, 2019).

⁷² “Struttin’ with Some Barbecue: Stories of Standards,” 3.

⁷³ *ibid.*

⁷⁴ *ibid.*

⁷⁵ Burlingame, “When You’re Smiling (1928),” 3.

⁷⁶ *ibid.*

⁷⁷ *ibid.*

song a Dixieland jazz standard. “When You're Smiling” has been recorded by: the vocalist Eddie Jefferson, the big bands of Count Basie, Stan Kenton, Duke Ellington, the Dave Brubeck Quartet, saxophonist Art Pepper, guitarist Joe Pass, and many other Dixieland musicians.⁷⁸ This song, as you can see, has been previously recorded by many male artists. Gilbert was one of the first jazz artists to break the gender mold. Many female jazz vocalists had performed the song but female instrumentalists performing the song were less common. As you are faced with the many male recordings available, you realize how unique Gilbert is.⁷⁹

When men came back from World War II, Gilbert and other women were limited in musical performance opportunities and jobs. Gilbert had to become a secretary and perform when she could. Despite the struggle that Gilbert faced, she continued to perform and advocate for other female jazz artists. Gilbert wanted to make female jazz musicians commonplace in society. It is because of Gilbert's performances and persistence that she became a successful jazz musician and she wanted to pave the way for future female jazz artists to establish their own careers in jazz.

The International Sweethearts of Rhythm

A group of women that also experienced hardships, and paved the way for other female jazz musicians, was the group the International Sweethearts of Rhythm. The Sweethearts were rediscovered by the departments studying women in the 1970s and 80s. The Sweethearts were viewed as political figures rather than musical artists.⁸⁰ The Sweethearts were remembered for their gender rather than for their talents, so it was not until this rediscovery that the Sweethearts were widely regarded as jazz artists. According to John McDonough, author of *America's 'Sweethearts': An All-Girl Band that Broke Racial Boundaries*, “the fact that the Sweethearts

⁷⁸ *ibid.*

⁷⁹ *ibid.*

⁸⁰ John McDonough, “America's 'Sweethearts': An All-Girl Band That Broke Racial Boundaries,” (NPR, 2011).

were women diminished their musical career.”⁸¹ These women were seen as novelty acts, not as respectable jazz artists in the 1940s. The Sweethearts were prolific jazz artists, but because of their gender, only a small number of their recordings survive.⁸²

The Sweethearts began their journey in rural Piney Wood, Mississippi in 1937. The idea of the Sweethearts was inspired by Phil Spitalny

and his All-Girl Orchestra. Spitalny achieved success in the music industry through the Hour of Charm radio station. He had other orchestras but his All-Girl Orchestra is what made him famous.

Spitalny went on to become a famous composer, music critic, musician, and bandleader.⁸³ Through the influence of Spitalny’s All-Girl Orchestra,⁸⁴



The International Sweethearts of Rhythm were formed.⁸⁵

As the leader of this all-girl orchestra, Spitalny was a well-known liar and braggart. He told the world that he spent 20,000 dollars searching all over the country for the perfect female musicians for his band when he did not.⁸⁶ Spitalny also did not create an all-girl orchestra to increase diversity in jazz. Spitalny created this orchestra because he believed a women’s sound and appearance to be more alluring to a male audience. These women were not appreciated for

⁸¹ McDonough, "America's 'Sweethearts': An All-Girl Band That Broke Racial Boundaries," 5.

⁸² *ibid.*

⁸³ Erica Collins, "All-Girl Orchestras: Helen May Butler, the Parisian Redheads, the Hour of Charm Orchestra (Phil Spitalny), Ina Rae Hutton, Dolly Dawn and More by Erica Collins," (The American Vaudeville Museum, 2021).

⁸⁴ *Sweethearts of Rhythm, 1940, (African American Registry, 2021).*

⁸⁵ Collins, "All-Girl Orchestras: Helen May Butler, the Parisian Redheads, the Hour of Charm Orchestra (Phil Spitalny), Ina Rae Hutton, Dolly Dawn and More by Erica Collins," 9.

⁸⁶ *ibid.*

their art; they were viewed as sexual objects. To attain the perfect sexual object, Spitalny had a series of requirements.⁸⁷

The women had to be in their twenties, have long hair, and weigh less than 120 pounds. They were not allowed to marry and they needed permission to date; if a member of the orchestra was asked on a date there would be many questions about the man: What is his profession? What is his education level? Does he have a respectable family? Is he suitable? Etc. If the committee did not give permission, the woman was not allowed to go on the date. To keep their weight down, the women would: play tennis, play badminton, go for a swim, play basketball, or dance. The most common rule broken was age. Women could be thirty or older and still perform.⁸⁸ These requirements are sexist because they objectify these women. The women could not just perform, they had to fit Spitalny's perfect idea of a woman in order to perform. Yes, the women had a choice to be in this group but they had limited options. Society in the 1930s-40s did not consider women as capable performers.⁸⁹ A woman was meant to take care of the home, the children, and dote on her husband. The men were the people allowed to achieve more.⁹⁰

Spitalny's All-Girl Orchestra served as an inspiration for the formation of The International Sweethearts of Rhythm. Helen Jones Woods, a member of the band, states, "My father heard the band over the radio one time and said, 'I've got a lot of girls here. Maybe I could start myself an all-girl band.'⁹¹" From there, the Sweethearts were born. The inspiration of one all-white girl band paved the way for a diverse all-girl band.⁹² An all-girl group containing

⁸⁷ibid.

⁸⁸ibid.

⁸⁹ ibid.

⁹⁰ ibid.

⁹¹ ibid.

⁹² *Sweethearts of Rhythm, 1940, (African American Registry, 2021).*

different races was unheard of in the south. One of the original members, Willie Mae Wong, was of Chinese descent. Two other members were of Hawaiian and Hispanic descent. In Mississippi law, white was the superior race and other races were viewed as inferior.⁹³

According to John McDonough, in 1941, the Sweethearts became professionals. This new fame came with two new white performers

including a saxophonist by the name of Rosalind Cron.

In the deep south, a white person performing with different races was viewed as a criminal act.⁹⁴ Cron

said, “We got to Baltimore and I asked Millie Jones, who was part American Indian and part African

American, if she'd like to go downtown on a bus



with me to window shop.” On their journey, the two women stopped for a soda and they could not get service. Cron continued, “I said to Millie, 'I'm just going to stop this waitress and find out why she's ignoring us. [Millie] got very excited and jumped up and ran up the stairs [of the restaurant]. She was really frightened.’”⁹⁶ Millie did not only have to contend with sexism, she had to contend with the racism of the south.

The race issue was further explained to Cron from the road manager. Cron said, “They called me in and explained that Jim Crow was a series of rules and laws, and explained what life was going to be like from now on.” According to John McDonough, the crew offered her the option of going home, but she resolved to stay the course. “After that Baltimore episode, I made up my mind then and there,” she says. “I was not going to back down.”⁹⁷ According to the Jim

⁹³ *ibid.*

⁹⁴ *ibid.*

⁹⁵ *Sweethearts of Rhythm, 1940, (African American Registry, 2021).*

⁹⁶ *ibid.*

⁹⁷ *ibid.*

Crow laws, Cron was a traitor to her race. Cron innately had privilege in the south because she was white, but she lost these privileges once she joined this diverse band.⁹⁸

Society had its own idea of the proper race and gender. Cron had to appear as African American in order to blend in. According to John McDonough, Cron either had to be her own race or become the race she associated with.⁹⁹ Cron says, “I would either know, understand and learn how to live as a black girl, or I could go home... Everybody knew this was dangerous territory.”¹⁰⁰ In the summer of 1945, however, there was no need for makeup, because the Sweethearts played in Paris and Germany as their true selves. After many years, a great band leader by the name of Earl Hines described The International Sweethearts of Rhythm as, “the first freedom fighters.”¹⁰¹ The International Sweethearts of Rhythm are not just historical figures that broke past gender and race limitations; these women were successful musicians.¹⁰²

Music

The International Sweethearts of Rhythm performed in the face of adversity and prevailed, establishing a successful jazz career.¹⁰³ The Sweethearts exhibit their talent for jazz in the song “Bugle Call Rag” from the *The Best of The International Sweethearts of Rhythm* album.¹⁰⁴ This album is influential because it highlights the group's most popular songs. The song, “Bugle Call Rag,” has swing attributes throughout with swung eighth notes and beats two and four emphasized. The song also has the musical attributes of a rag with syncopated rhythms. Syncopation in music means that regular accents are displaced creating a disjunct feeling in the

⁹⁸ *ibid.*

⁹⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*

¹⁰¹ John McDonough, “America's 'Sweethearts': An All-Girl Band That Broke Racial Boundaries,” (NPR, 2011).

¹⁰² McDonough, “America's 'Sweethearts': An All-Girl Band That Broke Racial Boundaries,” 3.

¹⁰³ Sandra Burlingame, “Bugle Call Rag (1922),” (JazzStandards, 2005).

¹⁰⁴ Burlingame, “Bugle Call Rag (1922),” 3.

music.¹⁰⁵ The first recording of “Bugle Call Rag” was in 1922 by the New Orleans Rhythm Kings.¹⁰⁶ The song was written by Jack Pettis, Bill Meyers, and Elmer Schoebel and was recorded by Henry "Red" Allen in 1932. This song was made popular by the swing-era orchestras of Benny Goodman and Glenn Miller.¹⁰⁷ The song was previously popularized by men, and was further popularized by the Sweethearts. The Sweethearts took the song and made it their own by adding their unique sound to the music. These women had to contend with sexist comparison but prevailed despite this criticism.¹⁰⁸

The Sweethearts continue their talents in the song “Blue Lou.” “Blue Lou” is also from *The Best of The International Sweethearts of Rhythm* album.¹⁰⁹ The crescendos and decrescendos throughout pull the listener in and out of this hypnotic piece of music. The dynamics allow the listener to feel every wave of emotion.¹¹⁰ “Blue Lou” was composed by Edgar Sampson. The song was first introduced by Columbia Records on October 16, 1933 by Benny Carter, a saxophonist and trumpeter. “Blue Lou” and “If Dreams Come True” became swing standards for the time.¹¹¹ Benny Carter and Chick Webb were arrangers that gave the song two distinct styles. Carter made the song dance-like with a dolce, sweet, trumpet solo. The Webb version has a brisk tempo utilizing multiple soloists in a swing style.¹¹² Ella Fitzgerald also sang this song in the 1950s. Fitzgerald tells the story of a woman who is sad because her love has left her. The emotion of lost love is translated into the Sweethearts interpretation as well. The slow tempo

¹⁰⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ Sandra Burlingame, “Blue Lou (1935),” (*JazzStandards*, 2005).

¹¹⁰ Burlingame, “Blue Lou (1935),” 2.

¹¹¹ *ibid.*

¹¹² *ibid.*

sustained notes, and slow vibrato depict the somber attitude of the piece.¹¹³ The next song is a more spirited interpretation.

The next song is “Sweet Georgia Brown” also on the album *The Best of The International Sweethearts of Rhythm*.¹¹⁴ Many songs did not survive the transition from the Roaring Twenties to the swing era (1930s-40s). Only some songs became long-lasting classics. “Sweet Georgia Brown” became one of the most enduring songs of the jazz age.¹¹⁵ This song was instantly successful. It was intimidating to play one of the most successful songs of the jazz age (1920s-30s). The Sweethearts boldly created their own interpretation of a popular song allowing for a female voice to be represented.¹¹⁷



The next song from this album is “Honeysuckle Rose.” The music is a classic of big band jazz with swung rhythms throughout.¹¹⁸ Many critics said female performers could only be demure and peaceful in their playing. In this song, the Sweethearts prove that women are deserving of more depth. The Sweethearts provided the loud and brash playing that many believed impossible for a woman to achieve. The struggle for respect was constant and societal standards were suffocating to a woman’s jazz career. Despite the sexism and racism fighting against these women, the International Sweethearts of Rhythm were successful. “Honeysuckle Rose” is by the composer Thomas “Fats” Waller. This song was first a dance number at Connie’s

¹¹³ *ibid.*

¹¹⁴ Sandra Burlingame, “Sweet Georgia Brown (1925),” (*JazzStandards*, 2005).

¹¹⁵ Burlingame, “Sweet Georgia Brown (1925),” 2.

¹¹⁶ Janice Cleary, *Sweet Georgia Brown Sheet Music*, (The Harvest History, 2011).

¹¹⁷ Burlingame, “Sweet Georgia Brown (1925),” 2.

¹¹⁸ Sandra Burlingame, “Honeysuckle Rose (1929),” (*JazzStandards*, 2021).

<https://www.jazzstandards.com/compositions-0/sweetgeorgiabrown.htm>.

Inn in Harlem. After the release of the album *Load of Coal*, “Honeysuckle Rose” had its debut on the *Old Gold Show* by Paul Whiteman.¹¹⁹ This is yet another song that was a hit for many male artists. The International Sweethearts of Rhythm chose to make this song uniquely their own despite the sexist comparison. The loud and confident nature of this song was threatening to sexist society. If women became stronger, then they became harder to control.¹²⁰

The International Sweethearts of Rhythm, to do what they loved, had to combat racism and sexism. To be an African American woman performing jazz you must accept degradation. The inspiration of the Sweethearts allows more women of different races to perform creating a lasting legacy. Women of multiple races now have an opportunity to do what they love because of the sacrifices made by the International Sweethearts of Rhythm. The Sweethearts are much more than political figures, they are revolutionary musicians.¹²¹

Conclusion

Women throughout history have all experienced sexism.¹²² This sexism affected the career possibilities for women, especially in music.¹²³ The gender norms and beliefs of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries created a restrictive role for women. The woman was meant to be the demure housewife while the man was allowed to achieve. The woman would clean the house, cook the dinner, take care of the children, and support her husband in his endeavors. The woman was always meant to take the supportive role while the man had the career.¹²⁴ This began to change when men were shipped off to World War II. The men left a space that women were encouraged to fill. Many women decided to fill the space left by male jazz musicians. Women

¹¹⁹ *ibid.*

¹²⁰ John McDonough, “America's 'Sweethearts': An All-Girl Band That Broke Racial Boundaries,” (NPR, 2011).

¹²¹ McDonough, “America's 'Sweethearts': An All-Girl Band That Broke Racial Boundaries,” 4.

¹²² Genevieve Wise, “A Definition of the Role of Homemaker by Two Generations of Women,” (Digital Commons @USU).

¹²³ Wise, “A Definition of the Role of Homemaker by Two Generations of Women,” 6.

¹²⁴ *ibid.*

were able to perform in the male-dominated genre of jazz on a large scale, gaining great opportunities. Once the men came back, however, women were expected to return to their former duties.¹²⁵

The women like Peggy Gilbert and The International Sweethearts of Rhythm did not wish to return to the home. These women wanted to continue to perform jazz. This continuation of jazz performances was not supported and these women were labeled as inferior to male performers.¹²⁶ African American women not only had to suffer this sexism, they had to suffer racism. African American women were regarded as too volatile for jazz, suffered name-calling, and were sexually assaulted in the jazz environment. Even if the women were talented, they could only move up from ‘bitch’ to ‘mama’ in identity.¹²⁷ This male-dominated genre of jazz did not encourage female jazz artists to succeed. Despite the struggle of sexism for Peggy Gilbert and the combined struggle of sexism and racism for The International Sweethearts of Rhythm, each of these women created lasting legacies.¹²⁸

¹²⁵Michele Aichele, “Women in Music - Overcoming Obstacles and Taking Career Control,” (Liberty Park Music, 2018).

¹²⁶ Talya Valenti, “A Survey to Investigate the Participation of Female Jazz-Trained Instrumentalist at WAAPA and in Perth's Professional Music Scene,” (Edith Cowan University: Research Online, 2018).

¹²⁷ Tammy L. Kernodle, “Black Women Working Together: Jazz, Gender, and the Politics of Validation,” (*Black Music Research Journal* 34, 1, 2014), 27–55.

¹²⁸ Stephanie Hall, “The Painful Birth of Blues and Jazz,” (Library of Congress, 2017).

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