Same-sex Role Models and Their Relation to the Lack of Female Participation in Instrumental Jazz

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Eng 3010: Project 4

Walking into room, I felt the expecting gaze of the entire jazz faculty focused on my horn and I. After giving the rhythm section my fast tempo, playing Charlie Parker’s “Donna Lee”, and executing high levels of technique throughout my improvised solo; expressions of doubt evolved into surprise, disbelief, and approval. I had finally proven my worth and musicianship as a female jazz musician. This experience of having to prove oneself is not uncommon among female jazz musicians. Because of discrimination and an underlying negative viewpoint concerning female jazz musicians, young women are discouraged from participating in the male dominated community. Professional female jazz musicians are beginning to gain recognition as significant artists within the community, however participation rates remain low among young girls. In conducting a study of middle and high school jazz festivals, Steinberg discovered that only 30% of the participants were female.[[1]](#footnote-1) While conducting research on female participation in instrumental jazz, University of Wyoming graduate Kathleen McKeage discovered in a certain Midwestern university that 60% of undergraduate music majors were female and only 20% of the students were enrolled in jazz ensembles.[[2]](#footnote-2) Lack of female participation is even observed in jazz education. The National Association for Music Education found that only 23% of college level instructors who taught jazz were female.[[3]](#footnote-3) Observing this participation gender gap in instrumental jazz, scholars are beginning to ask, “Where are all the girls?”[[4]](#footnote-4)

It is well known that the community of jazz musicians is male dominated and that this fact is directly related to the tradition and history of the music. Another common notion regarding female jazz musicians is that women can’t play jazz as well as men, in the words of professional saxophonist Tia Fuller, “she can’t play.”[[5]](#footnote-5) While it clear throughout history that men were the primary innovators of this music and dominated the bandstand since it’s origins, scholars are still attempting to understand the reasons supporting the overall negative viewpoint towards the idea of women joining the stage. Much evidence leads us to believe that general sociocultural stereotypes of women influence the ideas of male dominance and the suggested roles of women within the context of professional musicianship. Other research argues a more psychological point of view concerning the way young ladies think, learn, and behave socially, which effects their mindset concerning jazz musicianship. Less explored are the concept of mentorship within the jazz community and the lack of female role models to encourage and motivate young women to pursue a career as a professional jazz musician. It is of interest to explore these concepts further as they are a core part of the jazz tradition.

My research will focus on the impact of female role models in music and the lack thereof in relation to low levels of female participation in instrumental jazz. The purpose of this proposed study is to examine how young female musicians conceive of and relate to role models as well as begin to understand the impact of same-sex role models in the jazz community. By exploring the concept of same-sex role models within the jazz community, a new avenue of research concerning female participation in instrumental jazz would be introduced. While studies have shown differences between male and female learning processes, it has yet to be proven how same-sex role models in jazz impact younger students, especially girls as a minority. Studying the phenomenon of same-sex role models will provide more insight into how the lack of professional female jazz musicians influences the disinterest and decline in participation among young girls. This paper will first review previous literature exploring factors contributing to the lack of female participation in instrumental jazz. Researchers have spent the past few years exploring the traditional exclusion of women in jazz, the influence of general sociocultural stereotypes of women, and the psychology of the female learning process and how it relates to learning jazz improvisation. The next section proposes a qualitative study that will explore the impact of same-sex role models within the instrumental performance and jazz community. The methods of this proposed study is then presented followed by a discussion of limitations of the proposed study, further research required, and the impact of the proposed study on the jazz community.

**Literature Review**

Traditional Exclusion

Female jazz musicians have faced discrimination throughout jazz history. Linda Dahl, author of *Stormy Weather: The Music and Lives of a Century of Jazzwomen,* has observed and connected this discrimination to the masculine tradition of the music and community. While defining factors that inhibited women from playing jazz, she states that in order to succeed as a jazz musician one must have “masculine” qualities such as “aggressive self-confidence on the bandstand, displaying ones ‘chops,’ or sheer blowing power; [and] a single-minded attention to career moves.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Dahl also observes that nightclubs, where jazz was mainly played and taught, were predominately male, and women who went there were met with ridicule and disapproval, shunned, and risked loss of respect.[[7]](#footnote-7) Researchers of jazz history tend to agree upon the masculinity of jazz being established through traditional performance settings and the approach to this music.

Despite an overall male dominance within the jazz community, many women have attempted to join the bandstand and be recognized as qualified contributors to the field. Although some succeeded, they were met with much opposition. Some bandleaders were completely against the idea of female jazz musicians. Well-known jazz drummer Buddy Rich once stated, “No chick will ever play in my band.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Others, however, were slightly more generous at providing career opportunities to women. Leslie Gourse relates the Melba Liston’s experience of playing for bandleaders such as Dizzy Gillespie, Count Basie, and Duke Ellington during the 1950’s.[[9]](#footnote-9) The men in the band would refer to her as “bitch,” a highly degrading term directed towards women during that time, until they heard her play, after which they commented, “Mama is alright.” [[10]](#footnote-10)

Melba Liston is one of many female musicians who broke the fraternal barriers of jazz during the 1900s. Most of these women, however, are not recognized as equal contributors to the history and progression of this music. Historically, women were seen to have had a specific function in jazz. Jazzmen*,* a 1939 history of jazz written by men, had a clear view of this relationship. Mario Dunkel analyzes the authors’ views concerning women within this text and presents them as the “three major roles reserved for women”: women can only be vocalists who strictly sing the blues; they may act in the background as “competitive career-women” who aid their husbands in obtaining a successful jazz career; and they may act as anonymous admirers of the musicians, acting as subservient and fulfilling men’s “appetite for women.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Another reason for women’s absence from jazz history is on account of their being removed from jazz history textbooks because “they had not mattered historically” or “they weren’t important enough.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Marie Selander notes that in cases, such as the jazz history books written in Sweden, women have completely ignored.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Mario Dunkel summarizes early views of the suggested relationship between women and jazz, establishing women as subservient to man and having no place of equality as musicians. As a result, female jazz musicians who influenced and contributed greatly to the development of the music are often ignored and deemed insignificant. Mara Selander, Sherrie Tucker, and the Oxford Journal of Music all indicate the large absence of female musicians in the recorded history of jazz in comparison to the great emphasis placed on male contributors. There remains a gap of information regarding female jazz musicians and their individual contribution. As a result of this gap, young girls have mostly male figures in jazz to try to imitate and relate to when pursuing a career in the field. In conclusion, all authors agree to a level of discrimination of female jazz musicians throughout jazz history and have concluded upon an overall negative viewpoint concerning women in jazz. Their conclusion on the overall of effect of this discrimination and negativity towards women has ended in only one result: the persistent lack of female jazz musicians.

Gender Stereotyping of Instruments and Views Concerning Women (Sociocultural vs. Within the Jazz Community)

As a result of discrimination within the community, researchers have noticed a significant lack of female instrumental participants. In a study of jazz musicians performed in 2002 by the National Endowment of the Arts, women were found to represent 47 percent of the labor force but only 15.6 percent of unionized jazz musicians.[[14]](#footnote-14) McKeage found in a study of 628 college music majors that significantly more men participate in jazz programs than women, men spend more time in jazz programs before withdrawing, and there is a dramatic decrease of women between high school and college jazz participation.[[15]](#footnote-15)

One reason for the lack of female participation that researchers have explored is the gender stereotyping of instruments. Ables and Porter conducted a study, which has become a breakthrough in sexual stereotyping of instruments, in which they presented several instruments to children in kindergarten through the fifth grade and asked them to pick which instrument they preferred to play. The researchers discovered that boys continually selected more “masculine” instruments while girl progressively chose more traditionally “feminine” instruments.[[16]](#footnote-16) Lewis Porter indicates that this gender stereotyping of instruments was a result of “strong social conventions” that deem which instruments are “proper” for young ladies to play.[[17]](#footnote-17) Young women of significant social status were expected to play the piano, which was considered a feminine instrument, in order to entertain guests and suitors for this was seen as ladylike.[[18]](#footnote-18) Ables and Porter concluded from their research that the flute, violin, and clarinet were also the most feminine instruments while the drums, trombone, and trumpet were more masculine.[[19]](#footnote-19) Considering that these “male” instruments construct the majority of jazz instrumentation, researchers confirm that gender stereotyping of instruments can directly influence the low participation rate of females in jazz.

Another common theory regarding the lack of female participation in jazz is the influence of sociocultural views of women on the jazz community. Alex Stewart, associate professor of music at University of Vermont, proposes that the aggressive musical style of jazz contradicts popular social beliefs of how women should behave.[[20]](#footnote-20) In his book *Making the Scene: Contemporary New York City Big Bands*, he writes, "Playing fast, loud, and rhythmically vigorous is widely perceived as masculine…. Lyrical, soft, and gentle styles are viewed as feminine or 'not masculine.'"[[21]](#footnote-21) World-renowned jazz composer Maria Schneider offers the concept of how young girls are raised in comparison to young boys. She observes, “while boys are playing someone is likely to ask what they're building… in the same circumstance, a person is likely to compliment a girl's appearance.”[[22]](#footnote-22) Schneider states that women grow up seeking attention based upon how other view them as opposed to young men who are encouraged to work diligently at creating an original work.[[23]](#footnote-23) Ellen Rowe, chair of the Department of Jazz and Improvisation Studies at University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, offers a statement in agreement with Schneider’s concept. While reflecting upon concept of solo improvisation involved with playing jazz, she says that men are taught to pursue attention as opposed to women are not given the proper “tools of confidence or self-esteem to handle such attention.”[[24]](#footnote-24) These two statements concur with each other under the belief that young girls are raised with the awareness of how they are perceived and allow this perception to dictate their behaviors. This presents a unique dilemma for female jazz musicians. Due to the societal expectations of women, they lack the needed bravado necessary for success in the jazz world. This results in negative stereotypes about a woman’s place within this world, which, because of societal expectations, she is more susceptible to and affected by the opinions about her as a musician, which leads to a lack of female jazz musicians.

While Ables and Porter have observed and proven the implied masculinity of jazz regarding instrumentation and gender stereotyping of such, Stewart, Schneider, and Rowe have associated this masculinity to sociocultural views of women and how they have impacted the jazz community. Identifying both as factors influencing the lack of female instrumentalists, researchers have continued to study common perceptions of women in society believing that the results will provide new revelations concerning the male and female relationship with jazz.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Psychology of Female Learning

Multiple studies have been performed regarding the psychology of females and its relationship to the lack of female participation in instrumental jazz. Many researchers believe that, through understanding the psychology of the female learning process in comparison to that of young men, they will reach a greater understanding of the participation gap within the jazz community. Many researchers also have begun to observe a pattern concerning women in jazz: as the amount of female jazz instructors and role models decrease, so does the participation rate of the following generation. Further exploration into this discovery focuses on the reason for this relationship.

Erin Wehr Flowers, assistant professor of instrumental music education at The University of Iowa, explores the gender gap in instrumental jazz participation by conducting a study in the form of surveying middle school, junior high, high school, and college students. The purpose of this study was to discern various psychological factors that contribute to the way females perceive and approach jazz improvisation, a main concept in the music.[[26]](#footnote-26) The results show that “females are significantly less confident, more anxious, and have less self-efficacy (attitude) towards learning jazz improvisation.”[[27]](#footnote-27) Flowers concludes these results as key factors that impede females from learning in jazz academic settings.[[28]](#footnote-28) Alexander views females’ approach to jazz from a behavioral aspect observing that females often define themselves based on relationships and social interactions which conflicts with emphasis of individuality in jazz improvisation.[[29]](#footnote-29) Lastly, McKeage conducted another study in which she interviewed three female college students who had studied jazz in high school and withdrew from the jazz program after their freshman year. Each participant in the interviewed agreed to the “importance of a positive, non- judgmental and nurturing environment with an emphasis on the social aspects of playing.”[[30]](#footnote-30) This study supports researchers’ theory that females tend to be more concerned with the social aspects of music rather than achievement or success.

The same study performed by McKeage also found that young female jazz instrumentalists noticed a lack of female role models: a person who encourages others and is followed as an example. This resulted in a further reduction of female participation. Of the three student participants in the study, none were able to specify a specific jazz female role model.[[31]](#footnote-31) During an interview with a reporter from NPR, well-known female jazz musicians such as Geri Allen and Ingrid Jensen were able to identify mentors who aided in their musicianship, however all their significant mentors and role models were male.[[32]](#footnote-32) Elizabeth Gould observes “women perform specific tasks more often and with greater success when the role models with whom they interact are women.”[[33]](#footnote-33)

Because of the tradition in which jazz is taught, through mentorship and passing along of information, jazz musicians and researchers agree to the importance of role models, especially for young aspiring female musicians. Geri Allen mentions mentorship as “such a core part” of the music and community. [[34]](#footnote-34) Research suggests that young girls would be more likely to pursue a career in jazz with the presence of female role models to help them navigate through the anxieties of learning improvisation and pressures of the male-dominated competitive atmosphere.

Additional research and studies of the influence of same-sex role models in music and the jazz community are need to bring about a more modern approach to analyzing the lack of female participation in instrumental jazz. As previous research has hinted that an increase in same-sex role models leads to an increase in interest among young girls, this concept should be explored further to provide concrete evidence proving the theory. To test my theory that girls prefer, are more interested in, and are more influenced by same-sex role models, I will conduct my study on a total of 100 of the top high schools and colleges with music programs that offer classical and jazz studies. I will first provide an explanation of the planned study method. Afterwards, I will discuss the limitations and impact of the proposed study.

**Methodology**

To research the influence of sam-sex role models among young female jazz musicians, I will distribute a survey to female student jazz musicians and classical musicians who have prior experience with playing jazz. These students will be selected from one high school and one college with the highest-ranking music programs within each state. This demographic is chosen in order to ensure that the responses represent a wide population within the community. My study will be an adaptation of Kathleen McKeage’s study “Gender and Participation in High School and College Instrumental Jazz Ensembles.” Surveys, as a qualitative study method, provide the opportunity to analyze large amounts of opinions and gain insight into the topic of study based on the majority. Surveys and interviews are two of the most popular methods of research within the field of music for they allow opinions to be recorded for analysis in comparison to the goals and mindset of the community.

The questions presented will be an arrangement of broad and open-ended questions. The first section of questions is designed to calculate an average of how may girls are able to identify a role model in their life, if that role model is of the same sex, and if that role model is an expert within the field of music. The next section focuses on eliciting information based on the role models’ impact in various areas of life such as academics, music, and life skills. The final section of the survey includes more open-ended questions asking for the students’ opinions of the concept of role models and, optionally, how the presence of a same-sex role model has inspired them to pursue a similar career path. Once the completed surveys are collected, the responses are sorted and the average majority opinion would be found in comparison to the other categorized responses. The overall result would be compared with similar studies and, if successful, either further research would be proposed or a solution to aid in the increase of female role models in jazz performance would be proposed.

**Discussion**

Because of the margins of error that exist within the survey process, it isn’t possible to completely depend on the accuracy of the responses. This survey will only give researchers an idea of how young girls think about the concept of role models and whether they feel that the presence of a same-sex role model is beneficial in choosing a career path in music and jazz. Considering that the result are favorable in the benefit of same-sex role models, further propositions may urge the jazz studies community to placed more female jazz musicians in positions of regard and expertise. More female musicians may appear at jazz festivals or on jazz studies faculties at college universities. As continued research proves the positive relationship between female jazz musician role models and participation within instrumental jazz, members within the community should begin to reconsider their mindsets concerning female jazz musicians. Although this study and method won’t end discrimination against females in jazz, it will provide a new research concept that could be paired with other theories to create insight into the issue of females existing as a steady minority within the jazz community.

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