Some Liked It Hot: Jazz Women in Film and Television, 1928-1959

Reviewed by Monica Mays

Female musicians have long been absent from jazz's historical narrative. Outside of famous blues and jazz singers—Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughn and the like—female jazz instrumentalists are rarely, if at all mentioned. Yet, recent scholarship has worked toward painting a more inclusive picture, giving voice to those so often excluded from the jazz canon and Kristin McGee can be included in those ranks. In her engaging book, *Some Liked It Hot: Jazz Women in Film and Television, 1928-1959*, McGee is concerned with representations of jazz women in an American (white) male-dominated jazz world. The title, borrowed from the 1951 film *Some Like It Hot*, suggests an approach centered on the new opportunities afforded to talented female musicians with the expansive changes in post-war media outlets. Drawing upon the recent work of feminist performance scholars as well as cultural jazz scholars whose work investigates the masculinist orientation of jazz's historical narrative by incorporating analyses of television and film, McGee's critical framework provides both an analysis and comparison of female performances to other "gendered phenomena" in American popular culture.

After an introduction, the book is divided into four major parts that proceed chronologically, beginning in the late 1920s and through the 1950s. Briefly, the first part, "Jazz Culture and All-Girl Films," describes the growing feminization of mass culture, popular music and jazz during the 1920s-30s as well as the rise of "novelty" all-girl bands including the Ingenues and the Harlem Playgirls. In the second part, "All-Girl Bands and Sound Films in the Swing Era," McGee examines the contrasting musical styles of two rarely mentioned female performing groups, Ina Ray Hutton's Melodears and Phil Spitalny's Musical Queens (later known as "The Hour of Charm") by discussing the new medium of short subject sound films. The third part, "Soundies and Features during the 1940s," focuses on the musical persona of Hazel Scott and her taste for "swinging the classics." McGee also investigates wartime all-girl swing bands by examining a number of soundies of Dave Schooler's 21 Swinghearts and independent black film performances of the International Sweethearts of Rhythm. The final part, "Variety Television and the 1950s," deals with representations of female musicianship on variety television by comparing four prominent performers: Ina Ray Hutton, Hazel Scott, Peggy Lee, and Lena Horne. The work contained in these sections creatively synthesizes materials drawn from film, interviews, oral histories, illustrations, recordings, biographies, and various secondary sources.

The first part of the book, "Jazz Culture and All-Girl Films," traces the feminization of popular entertainment genres such as vaudeville, film, cabaret, and variety revues. This process of feminization was premised on the encouragement of "respectable" middle-class female patronage. As McGee discusses, popular entertainment producers and organizers attempted to create programs suitable for families whereby increasing the number of female patrons. Theater management also began regulating the behavior of patrons, prohibiting prostitutes from attending, and censoring harsh language. Many male patrons and various culture critics (McGee briefly discusses Adorno's critique on jazz and popular music) did not wholeheartedly agree with the transformation of popular entertainment audiences. McGee argues, moreover, that this "radical transformation of women in public popular culture contexts incited a moral panic surrounding jazz and that women's activities as fans, performers, instrumentalists, jazz dancers, and vocalists fostered a 'feminized' image of jazz culture during the 1920s" (29).

She illuminates female participation in mass culture contexts with an examination of two racially distinct "Jazz Age and Depression-era female jazz groups." By comparing the performance and reception of the (white) Ingenues and the (black) Harlem Playgirls, McGee illustrates impenetrable racial barriers that implicated economic advantages and opportunities to white jazz groups "whose music adopted and appropriated black music and dance" (13). The evidence presented makes this even more apparent. On the one hand, the all-white Ingenues, were one of the "first nationally successful vaudeville all-girl bands and also the first female jazz band to perform throughout the world" (36). Starring in various film performances—McGee talks at length about the group's appearance in *Maids and Music*, 1937—they enjoyed steady employment and one of the longest performing careers in the early part of the 20th century, touring internationally in Europe, Asia, South Africa, and Australia. On the other hand, the all-black Harlem Playgirls, given racial and social divisions, were not awarded opportunities to perform in short subject films or appear on electronic recordings. Rather, they performed on vaudeville stages, in hotels, and for civic functions while traveling on black theater circuits booked by the notorious Theater Organization Booking Agency (TOBA).

The second part, “All-Girl Bands and Sound Films in the Swing Era,” follows jazz women into the rapidly changing media landscape of the 1930s. Its major claim is that the experimental nature of the 1930s was “especially suited to performing women whose adaptive strategies enabled them simultaneously to mediate the more radical subcultural landscape of vaudeville theaters, cabarets, and burlesque houses as well as the growing film and radio industry” (109). As new mediums, moreover, integrated sound and image, a more heavily feminized and gendered instrumental style developed. McGee details this development with two of the Depression-era’s “most visible and mass-mediated [white] all-girl groups” Phil Spitalny’s Musical Queens, later to become the Hour of Charm and Ina Ray Hutton’s Melodears. While Spitalny’s group supported both classically minded instrumentalists as well as jazz and popular music players, Hutton’s Melodears remained devoted to dance-band and swing music. Yet, the gendered images of both groups accommodated notions of femininity deemed appropriate by Hollywood and American society in general as the influence of moralist and religious groups increasingly asserted its power over mass-mediated contexts.

McGee peppers her critical discussion with descriptions of female jazz performers dress and attire. For instance, during the *Hour of Charm* radio broadcasts, the femininity and delicacy of Spitalny’s all-girl orchestra was conveyed with excessive, frilly gowns and romantic stage lighting. In a more chic and modern approach, the Melodears, in the short subject film *Accent on Girls*, “sport short-cropped, bobby-pinned hair, stylish billowing pants and white-lapelled satin blouses” (100). Issues of female propriety permeated much of American social values. Jazz critics, journalists, editorialists, and the like were more inclined to speak of jazz women’s appearance and marriage status rather than their playing ability.

McGee begins the third part, “Soundies and Features during the 1940s,” with a discussion of jazz pianist and vocalist Hazel Scott whose “proclivity for ‘swinging the classics’” blurred gendered and racial boundaries. In McGee’s words, “The reception of her heavily mediated performances…betrayed the convoluted cultural landscape of racial segregation, gendered prohibitions, and the pervasive American fascination with black sexuality and expressive culture” (132). Scott’s drive to put “Liszt behind the 8-beat” was an act of personal creativity and agency at a time when African American female performers were often highly sexualized and fetishized by (white) popular culture. McGee examines Scott’s appearances as a “specialty act” in the MGM musicals *Broadway Rhythm* and *I Dood It* as well as her “dazzling musical performance” as an incidental nightclub singer-pianist in George Gershwin’s biopic *Rhapsody in Blue* (1945). Scott, like Lena Horne, deliberately turned down stereotypical roles for black female entertainers. As a result, the black press praised Scott for portraying cultured and educated African American characters.

McGee then broadens “the cultural scope of previous explorations of wartime and swing by enlisting a comparative discussion of female performances of jazz and popular music via the new audio/visual mediums of soundies” (134). She examines all-girl band performances of (feminized and racialized) musical genres—swing, sweet, and hot—and contrasts such performances with images of Hollywood pinups, substitute war workers, and other popular wartime female icons. She looks at the ways in which female musicians and band managers strategically used images as a way of mediating contentious attitudes toward female jazz instrumentalists. Particularly, she traces the extended practice of “swinging the classics” with Dave Schooler’s 21 Swinghearts in the musical soundies *In an Eighteenth-Century Drawing Room*, *Night Ride*, and *Tchaikovskiana*. “Sweet” all-girl bands, as McGee refers to them, like the 21 Swinghearts, performed a variety of light classical works as well as film music, popular songs, and jazz arrangements with strings. For comparison, McGee discusses all-girl jazz groups led by sexually attractive female leaders like Carol Adams and Thelma White in soundies *Swing It, Mr. Schubert* and *Hollywood Boogie Woogie*, respectively. As McGee states, “The physical appearance of female bandleaders became the selling point for these groups as lead women sang, danced, and wore dresses and costumes that augmented their female sexuality” (166-7). Such all-girl bands, however, often appropriated black male jazz performativity—from the use of jive lyrics to a shout chorus with brass and saxophones, a style typical of Fletcher Henderson’s band. McGee turns her discussion to the International Sweethearts of Rhythm, one of the only female “black” swing bands during the 1940s, in the context of the independent black sound film, *That Man of Mine*. She expands Sherrie Tucker’s discussion of the all-girl swing band with an analysis of the black film industry and representations of black female instrumentalists.

In the final part of this narrative, McGee turns to television as a foil for investigating representations of female musicianship and gender roles in American popular culture. In her words, these closing chapters “attempt to answer questions about jazz’s postwar fallout and of the general hardships incurred by jazz musicians who had maintained successful performance and recording careers during the 1930s and 1940s but who struggled during the more conservative McCarthy era” (15). She examines the popular television format vaudeo as well as variety television’s incorporation of early theatrical formats like vaudeville and cabaret. She then compares the images,

performances, and reception of prominent female television hosts, Ina Ray Hutton, Peggy Lee, Hazel Scott, and Lena Horne. Hutton hosted her own show, the *Ina Ray Hutton Show*, in the 1950s. The show featured an all-girl jazz band that "prioritized a familiar medley of popular music and jazz standards" (215). By the late 1950s, however, Hutton found it increasingly difficult to find women performers as more and more were leaving performing behind for motherhood and marriage.

Throughout this book, questions of race inevitably arise. As a powerful mediator, racial identities were displayed visually on music television programs. Hazel Scott's *The Hazel Scott Show*, and Peggy Lee's and Lena Horne's appearances on variety television programs spoke to the different representational strategies for black and white women. Scott, although red baited by anti-communist committees for her outspoken political activism, exhibited a sense of sophistication, style, and class during television appearances—seemingly done as a way of placating negative stereotypes about black performing women. Horne, in similar fashion, was revered for her stunning physical appearance and ambiguous racial identity as a light-skinned African American woman. Yet, she, like Scott, successfully negotiated a contract with MGM prohibited demeaning, stereotypical, or racist roles and her musical features, moreover, represented her as serious performing artist. Representations of Lee were often contradictory: depicted as either a highly sexualized and racialized nightclub jazz singer on LP recording covers, or as a small-town, down-to-earth unassuming Mid-western girl on variety television. Furthermore, McGee points out that racial identities "continued to drive popular music taste, genre categorization, and most importantly, professional performing opportunities for female jazz musicians" (244).

Although she acknowledges racial barriers and differences, the work contained in this book is still lopsided. Only two out of eleven chapters explicitly detail black female performers and groups, chapter five on Hazel Scott and chapter eight on the multi-racial International Sweethearts of Rhythm. Understandably, not much material survives that documents black female performativity, as McGee writes, "Unfortunately and consequently, little primary source material remains with which to study the musical performances of these early African American swing groups" (35-6). Much of this attests to the deep seeded racist ideologies that gripped American society and cultural institutions during these transformative interwar and postwar years. Yet, greater pains need to be taken in order to draw a more even understanding of jazz performing women.

Whether conjuring images of cultured white women or those of sexualized Hollywood pinup girls, new media outlets like early film and television provided visual and aural (mis)representations of female jazz performers. All-girl bands and female bandleaders initially gained currency in American popular culture as novelty and specialty acts. After WWII, however, performing women witnessed resurgence with the expanding avenue of variety television and dramatic changes in the Hollywood film industry. But, as McGee's narrative explains, jazz criticism, canonization, and classicism effectively eradicated the inclusion of jazz women from the canon. McGee, although "tempted to plead for a revisionist historical project," finds contentment in "exposing the philosophical precedents, development, and eventual static reproduction of such a jazz canon" (256). Such reproductions eventually collapse, unable to sustain the weight of the many cultural groups that encompass American society. While McGee may have saved a deeper exploration of black female jazz women for another volume, the work contained in this book sheds light on the "gendered absences" apparent in the jazz canon. In her engaged style, McGee has provided a clear examination and analysis of recordings, early film and television, and other source material, producing a convincing and compelling addition to musicology, jazz and feminist performance scholarship.

Source URL: https://ethnomusicologyreview.ucla.edu/journal/volume/14/piece/486