

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Leonard Feather and the Gender Ignorant Language of Jazz Mastery

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Abstract

Leonard Feather (1914–1994) was one of the first (and only) prominent jazz critics to recognize gender discrimination within jazz and attempt to redress the issue. But even by the 1950s, Feather grew frustrated with his inability to effect meaningful change for women musicians. He could not understand why women like Beryl Booker, Melba Liston, Vi Redd, and others did not receive more attention, even after he arranged tours and produced record dates for them (Feather 1987). The privileged position he held within the music industry—a position he had cultivated and leveraged in support of other musicians he felt had been unfairly discriminated against—ultimately seemed to do little for many of the women he championed. Women jazz masters remain few and far between.

What does it mean to be a jazz master, and who determines modes of mastery? In this article, I examine some of the musicians for whom he advocated and how he advocated for them, including columns he authored, albums he produced, and Blindfold Tests he administered. To conclude, I follow Feather into the 1990s to examine how he dealt with who was to blame for jazz's gender discrimination. In doing so, I reveal how jazz patriarchy maintained dominance over one of jazz's most prominent decision-makers. I demonstrate how, despite his intentions, Feather's embeddedness and investment in jazz patriarchy (in its ideological and commercial systems) resulted in a gender ignorant failure to critique the systems of mastery at the root of his connoisseurship.

As a musically-inclined kid growing up in the nineties and early 2000s, with two older brothers already in jazz band and eagerly awaiting the day when I, too, could join the band, it was not hard to know where to go to learn about jazz. The language of “jazz masters” surrounded me wherever I turned. Some of my first albums were from the Verve Jazz Masters series (1994–1996), fifty-eight albums of rereleases featuring musicians deemed “masters” in jazz. Additionally, the National Endowment for the Arts began its Jazz Masters Fellowship program in 1982, and musicians soon began to be identified with the prefix “Jazz Master” in news coverage, biographies, and program notes. This language is connected to the 1980s legislation naming jazz as “America’s classical music” and, further, to jazz’s increasing historicization and institutionalization in the 1950s and 1960s. In midcentury, jazz writers in the U.S. contributed to the process of canonization of select cohorts of musicians. Perhaps the most direct of these was the MacMillan Jazz Masters Series, edited by Martin Williams, which included six books published between 1965 and 1972: *Jazz Masters of the Twenties* (Hadlock 1965), *Jazz Masters of the Thirties* (Stewart 1972), *Jazz Masters of the Forties* (Gitler 1966), *Jazz Masters of the Fifties* (Goldberg 1965), *Jazz Masters of New Orleans* (Williams 1967), and *Jazz Masters in Transition, 1957–1969* (Williams 1970).

Even if the term “jazz master” wasn’t used by my band director, or by every interviewee in the 2001 Ken Burns *Jazz* documentary (which I rabidly consumed as a middle schooler), the same people and values were reinstated at every turn in terms of who was mentioned and revered, and who performed.

Table 1. Chapters focusing on women in books in the MacMillan Jazz Masters Series

Title	Author, Year	Total chapters	Chapters focusing on women
Jazz Masters of the Twenties	Richard Hadlock, 1965	9	1
Jazz Masters of the Thirties	Rex Stewart, 1972	19	0
Jazz Masters of the Forties*	Ira Gitler, 1966	9	0
Jazz Masters of the Fifties	Joe Goldberg, 1965	12	0
Jazz Masters of New Orleans*	Martin Williams, 1967	11	0
Jazz Masters in Transition, 1957–69	Martin Williams, 1970	87	2

*indicates that the book contained an index.

As a child, it was not clear to me *why* particular musicians were jazz masters (whether formally or informally), nor did it occur to me to ask—I knew only that these were the musicians I should seek if I wanted to develop my skills as a jazz musician. These were the musicians who were worth my time and my allowance, and whose albums populated my birthday wishlists.

Through their music and their stories, jazz masters shape what jazz is and can be. But what does it mean to call someone a jazz master? Who is left out of mastery, and why? And who determines modes of mastery? Wherever it is used, “jazz master” is typically a poorly defined phrase that relies on a common and unspoken understanding of what makes a “master.” A term whose potential definitions are based in racist and classist historical contexts, “master” is also clearly embedded within both patriarchy and jazz patriarchy (imagine referring to someone like Terri Lyne Carrington as a “jazz mistress”). “Jazz master” is not a gender-neutral term—a simple accounting of who is deemed a “jazz master” belies the notion that the term has ever been, or perhaps can be, gender-neutral. Take, for example, the MacMillan Jazz Masters series, whose chapters typically focus on a single musician or band. As noted in Table 1, the total number of chapters featuring women across the series is three.¹

The NEA Jazz Masters reflect an improved, if still not yet optimistic accounting: from its beginning in 1982 to 2025, 16% of awards have gone to women. Finally, of the fifty-eight albums in the 1994–1996 Verve Jazz Masters Series (not including the two compilation albums), fourteen feature women—a whopping 24%. But before celebrating jazz’s 1990s gender progress, consider the following: each of the fourteen women featured in the Verve Jazz Masters series was a singer—there were no women instrumentalists featured; relatedly, out of these projects, this series depended the most on consumer sales.²

Powerbrokers who curated series like these had and have an outsized role in deciding what jazz musicians get to be referred to as “jazz masters,” and further, who shapes the image of jazz’s future. The way jazz critics and connoisseurs prioritize, collect, and perform knowledge in the service of curating and maintaining a canon of jazz mastery that typically privileges male musicians is a defining feature of jazz patriarchy. I understand jazz patriarchy as the social and political system that has organized jazz histories, values, sounds, and communities around men and male domination over women, non-binary, and trans-musicians, agents, partners, leaders, and others. Focusing on jazz patriarchy offers an

¹The one woman in *Jazz Masters of the Twenties* was Bessie Smith. Her chapter began: “Only one woman contributed significantly to the development of jazz in the twenties.” Richard Hadlock, *Jazz Masters of the Twenties* (New York: MacMillan Press, 1965), 219.

Jazz Masters in Transition, 1958–1969 is a series of articles, interviews, profiles, narratives, and reviews written by Williams across the decade; so, although there are many chapters, they are very short. The two women featured are Ella Fitzgerald and Sarah Vaughan. (The vocal trio Lambert, Hendricks, and Ross, which includes Annie Ross, was also featured.)

Women were also rarely mentioned in these volumes. Only two volumes contained an index: 3% of index entries in *Jazz Masters of the Forties* were women; and 7% of index entries in *Jazz Masters of New Orleans* were women.

²These included Ella Fitzgerald, Astrid Gilberto, Billie Holiday, Nina Simone, Sarah Vaughan, Dinah Washington, Ella Fitzgerald (with Louis Armstrong), Dinah Washington, Sarah Vaughan, Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, Anita O’Day, Blossom Dearie, and Nina Simone.

opportunity to analyze power and privilege within jazz, reframing the problem of gender inequity in jazz away from women's supposed inaction, lack of desire, or exceptionality, and back on the systems of power that oppress women and gender-diverse individuals. As a framing device, jazz patriarchy connects stories, quotes, and experiences from across jazz history that span the gamut of patriarchal abuses and ignorances within jazz, regardless of the intent of the individual(s) involved. This term can include deconstructing and reimagining gendered ways of collecting and mastering knowledge, acknowledging the valences of violence faced by women, non-binary, trans, and queer individuals in jazz, understanding the ways that gendered language has been used and weaponized throughout jazz's history, and much more.

In this article, I focus on Leonard Feather, one of jazz's most influential critics and, as John Gennari quips, "jazz criticism's liberal conscience," to deconstruct the relationship between mastery and jazz patriarchy.³ Born in England, Feather (1914–1994) officially moved to the United States in 1939 and quickly became part of the New York jazz scene. In addition to writing and editing for jazz magazines like *Metronome*, *Down Beat*, and *JazzTimes*, he also wrote about jazz in popular publications like the *LA Times*, *Esquire*, and *Playboy*. He was the first white jazz editor for the *New York Amsterdam News*. His writings include numerous histories, encyclopedias, and yearbooks of jazz. He was also a record and concert producer, pianist, and composer. Feather had nearly every power one could imagine a connoisseur, critic, or impresario to have, and nearly every tool at his disposal: an encyclopedic knowledge of jazz and jazz discography from both records and engaging with jazz musicians, a working knowledge of the musical and historical context to determine trends and offer stylistic criticism, and the personal and insider knowledge from simply being with musicians to lend additional authority. A renowned tastemaker, he had the power to define jazz both in terms of what it sounded like and who belonged, and he had the ability to create recording, club, and tour gigs for his chosen artists. He had the power to inscribe artists into history—and he became one of the first and only prominent jazz critics to recognize gender discrimination within jazz and attempt to address the issue.

Throughout his career, Feather attempted to leverage his power of esthetic judgment to champion women within jazz. For Feather, connoisseurship had the potential to be a form of advocacy, building a space for women within the language of jazz mastery. Although he had successfully leveraged his position within the music industry in support of other musicians he felt had been unfairly racially discriminated against, Feather was ultimately unsuccessful in his attempts to promote many of the women he supported. In what follows, I provide an overview of some of the musicians for whom he advocated and how he advocated for them, including columns he authored, albums he produced, and Blindfold Tests he administered. To conclude, I follow Feather into the 1990s to examine how he dealt with who was to blame for jazz's gender discrimination. In doing so, I reveal how jazz patriarchy pervades the language of jazz mastery through gender ignorance. I demonstrate how, despite his intentions, Feather's embeddedness and investment in jazz patriarchy (in its ideological and commercial systems) resulted in a failure to critique the systems and language of mastery at the root of his connoisseurship. Ultimately, Feather's story reveals how mastery's embeddedness within jazz patriarchy refuses to accept women, however exceptional they are; gender equity instead requires a full rethinking of the defining features and values of jazz mastery.

Jazz Mastery

As Monica Hairston, Christi Jay Wells, John Gennari, Sherrie Tucker, Tracy McMullen, Guthrie Ramsey, Nichole Rustin, and others have examined, critics of every era of jazz have overwhelmingly privileged masculine musical codes and careers as they identified and determined jazz values and formed their histories of jazz.⁴ Whether it was *Down Beat* or *Metronome* critics attempting in the

³John Gennari, *Blowin' Hot and Cool: Jazz and Its Critics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 56.

⁴Gennari, *Blowin' Hot and Cool*; Guthrie Ramsey, "Bebop, Jazz Manhood, and 'Piano Shame,'" in *Who Hears Here? On Black Music, Pasts and Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2022); Nichole Rustin-Paschal, *The Kind of Man I Am: Jazz Masculinity and the World of Charles Mingus Jr.* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2017); Nichole Rustin, "Mary Lou

1930s–1950s to elevate jazz to high art discourse (or administrators and faculty developing jazz and “dance band” curricula in colleges),⁵ critics in the 1950s and 1960s to align jazz with Black musicians and civil rights politics,⁶ 1930s leftist critics privileging what they heard as jazz’s relationship with “proletarian culture,”⁷ 1960s and 1970s avant-garde musicians and critics who failed to recognize women’s capacity for free improvisation,⁸ or 1990s critics reacting to the slow admittance of a handful of women into the jazz canon, jazz powerbrokers crafted narratives permeated with gender exclusion. In doing so, they often used what Farah Jasmine Griffin calls their “preponderance of white male authority” to maintain, protect, and elevate their own interests in jazz.⁹ Daphne Brooks notes that such tastemakers have the potential to “further codify common presumptions about cultural belonging, who matters and who ‘made’ things that we all supposedly value and believe to be worthy of care.”¹⁰ In doing so, they could claim some tangential mastery of their own—not as musicians, but as musical connoisseurs who had in some way developed the unique skills and talent needed to be able to determine esthetic value. In many ways, critics were some of jazz’s first connoisseurs, and as they helped to develop languages and markets for jazz, they likewise crafted crucial frameworks for thinking about and knowing jazz for subsequent connoisseurs, musicians, and fans.¹¹ They defined jazz mastery (either directly or indirectly), and further, named jazz masters.

Jazz has a particularly well-defined image of a connoisseur: they are essentially what Ingrid Monson refers to as white male hipsters, whose collection and performance of consumptive jazz knowledge seemed to offer them a tangential relationship to blackness, and, through that, masculinity to which they otherwise would not have access.¹² Even if, as culture studies scholar Roy Shuker demonstrates, record collectors are a far more diverse group than typically assumed, the particular performance of knowledge in which collectors and connoisseurs engage remains gendered.¹³ Musical mastery as a connoisseur, critic, record collector, or impresario, is inextricably linked to an often unmarked and simultaneously masculine mode of knowledge production, which American culture studies scholar Gayle Wald writes, “privileges the acquisition of knowledge for its own sake.”¹⁴ Performances of knowledge for its own sake reflect long-held Western philosophical ideals based on a gender binary that intersects with a racial binary, in which white masculinity is mapped onto qualities like individuality, autonomy, objectivity, and universalism: that is, collections are curated and held by individuals according to their own rules of esthetic judgment, which, by virtue of the mastery of their knowledge, are seemingly objective and universal determinants of moral and artistic goodness. As Gennari writes, male critics frequently deployed a “concept of criticism that stresses taut discipline, rationality, and judiciousness—qualities assumed to be part of a masculine intellectual seriousness set off from the

Williams Plays Like a Man!’ Gender, Genius, and Difference in Black Music Discourse,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 104:3 (Summer 2005): 445–62; Sherrie Tucker, *Swing Shift: ‘All-Girl’ Bands of the 1940s* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

⁵Christi Jay Wells, “‘A Dreadful Bit of Silliness’: Feminine Frivolity and Ella Fitzgerald’s Early Critical Reception,” *Women & Music* 21 (2017): 43–65; Tracy McMullen, “The College Jazz Program as Tradition Making: Establishing a New Lineage in Jazz,” *Women & Music* 27 (2023): 32–50.

⁶Gennari, *Blowin’ Hot and Cool*; Ingrid Monson, *Freedom Sounds: Civil Rights Call Out to Jazz and Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁷Monica Hairston, “Gender, Jazz, and the Popular Front,” in *Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies*, ed. Nichole T. Rustin and Sherrie Tucker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 64–89.

⁸Sherrie Tucker, “Bordering on Community: Improvising Women Improvising Women-in-Jazz,” in *The Other Side of Nowhere: Jazz, Improvisation, and Communities in Dialogue*, ed. Daniel Fischlin and Ajay Heble (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 244–67; Val Wilmer, *As Serious As Your Life: Black Music and the Free Jazz Revolution, 1957–1977* (London: Serpent’s Tail Publishing, 2018).

⁹Farah Jasmine Griffin, *In Search of Billie Holiday: If You Can’t Be Free, Be a Mystery* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2001), 99.

¹⁰Daphne Brooks, *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2022), 57.

¹¹Gennari, *Blowin’ Hot and Cool*, 3.

¹²Ingrid Monson, “The Problem with White Hipness: Race, Gender, and Cultural Conceptions in Jazz Historical Discourse,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 48, no. 3 (1995): 396–422. See also Rustin-Paschal, *The Kind of Man I am*.

¹³Roy Shuker, *Wax Trash and Vinyl Treasures: Record Collecting As A Social Practice* (London: Routledge, 2010).

¹⁴Gayle Wald, “Rosetta Tharpe and Feminist ‘Un-Forgetting,’” *Journal of Women’s History* 21, no. 4 (Winter 2009): 157.

infantilized and feminized emotional realm of mass popular culture.”¹⁵ Critics (or, as Gennari writes, “proselytizers, intermediaries, gatekeepers, translators, rhetoricians, conceptualizers, producers, and analysts of jazz”) are able to use their positions of relative power to make decisions that affect the field of jazz based on their esthetic judgment, curated through their connoisseurship.¹⁶ As one of jazz’s most influential critics and impresarios, Feather had more opportunities than most to craft an alternative esthetic language to suit his own attempts at advocacy; instead, he based his decades-long pursuit of gender equality on a definition of jazz mastery seeped in patriarchal values that refused women access.

Feather Advocates for Women

Within the mid-century, pre-*Feminine Mystique*, pre-second-wave feminism context in which Feather worked for much of his career, the number of women for whom he advocated is striking. His attempts to foreground and promote female jazz musicians included writing about them in jazz columns like the occasional 1950s *Down Beat* special feature “Girls in Jazz”; these included Beryl Booker, Mary Osborne, Norma Carson, Bonnie Wetzel, Marian McPartland, Barbara Carroll, Annie Ross, Melba Liston, Vi Redd, Jutta Hipp, Toshiko Akiyoshi, Una Mae Carlisle, and Hazel Scott.¹⁷ He produced women-centric albums like *Strip Tease* featuring The Hip Chicks (1945), *Girls in Jazz* (1948), *Cats vs. Chicks* (1954), *Melba Liston and her ‘Bones* (1958), *Bird Call* (1962) featuring Vi Redd, and records by Billie Holiday, Anita O’Day, Helen Humes, Helen Merrill, and Maxine Sullivan, among others. He also wrote many liner notes for albums featuring women, including those for all of Jutta Hipp’s albums. He organized concerts and tours; for example, he placed Beryl Booker on a European tour with Billie Holiday, during which he finally was able to hear Hipp live in Germany. This experience resulted in him helping to convince her to move to the United States to pursue a jazz career. Throughout his promotional efforts, Feather highlighted women’s struggles over and over, careful to explain to readers that this prejudice was not due to lack of effort, skill, or beauty on their part. He would explain that “girl musicians have to endure the stigma of being rated as ‘not bad for a girl’ and ‘very good for a girl,’” before assuring readers that “There is no need for any such reservation in the case of . . .,” after which he would fill in the name of that article’s focus.¹⁸ His goal seems clear: to incorporate more women within the language of jazz mastery.

Of course, the language of his advocacy suited the constraints of the times in which it was written, and Feather created and contributed to what Sherrie Tucker refers to as the “uncritical reproduction of dominant gender ideology” in jazz histories.¹⁹ Perhaps the most simple and prevalent example is his choice of language: across his coverage and many projects, Feather (along with almost every other jazz writer), is far more apt to use “girls” instead of “women.” In *Swing Shift: “All-Girl” Bands of the 1940s*, Tucker notes a similar “generational dissonance” between herself and her interviewees, who overwhelmingly preferred the phrase “all-girl” bands (without quotations), in part to show that they were “really, truly, unquestionably girls.”²⁰ Tucker acknowledges that, by using the term “girl,” the women in these bands worked “under an umbrella of both opportunity and devaluation,” an umbrella that Feather likewise used to shield (or obscure) the women in his focus. In his 1987 career retrospective, he seemed in equal measures defensive and aware of the potential infantilization of the title *Girls in Jazz*, noting with a crucial parenthetical that, “Women might have been uneasy about being called girls, but nobody was sensitive enough (or brave enough) to voice any objection.”²¹

As Tucker has explored in detail, jazzwomen often put their womanhood at risk by performing jazz (especially as instrumentalists).²² Much like Tucker’s narrators, Feather attempted to put his readers at

¹⁵Gennari, *Blowin’ Hot and Cool*, 16–17.

¹⁶Gennari, *Blowin’ Hot and Cool*, 3.

¹⁷In 1962, Feather explained that “The series eventually ran out of steam, simply because we ran out of girls.” Leonard Feather, “Focus On: Alto Saxophonist, Soprano Saxophonist, Vocalist Vi Redd,” *Down Beat* 29, no. 24 (September 13, 1962): 23.

¹⁸Leonard Feather, “The RCA Victor Predictor Points to Beryl Booker,” *In the Groove* 1, no. 11 (January 1947): 2, 8.

¹⁹Tucker, *Swing Shift*, 6.

²⁰Tucker, *Swing Shift*, 2.

²¹Leonard Feather, *The Jazz Years: Ear Witness to an Era* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1987), 131.

²²Tucker, *Swing Shift*.

ease by emphasizing that jazzwomen were still, at their core, *women* (or *girls*). In a 1953 “Feather’s Nest” column, he emphasized his wonder and awe at girls who were “all girl”: “A general jazz trend that has pleased me very much lately is the success of more girl musicians than ever before: Barbara Carroll, Marian McPartland, and, at long last, Beryl Booker, flanked by Bonnie Wetzel and Elaine Leighton. I’m pleased, too, that unlike so many girl musicians, they are all girl . . .”²³ Feather does not explain what it means to be “all girl,” but in listing musicians who were nearly all white, Feather reiterates the already well-established link between girlhood and whiteness.²⁴ But he also made the same argument for Black women like Melba Liston, who bucked jazzwoman tradition by playing the trombone and working as a composer and arranger. In a 1956 feature titled “A Wailing Girl Trombonist: This Melba is a Peach,” Feather reassured readers that despite her work in jazz (as an instrumentalist, no less!), she is very womanly: “With or without horn, Melba is a striking figure—tall and slim, with a dazzling smile and features recalling a Greek statue carved in bronze. The guys in the band pay her the highest of compliments by saying, ‘She’s just like one of us.’ However, unlike some distaff musicians, she is beyond a doubt a girlish, womanly, female, feminine dame.”²⁵

In many ways, Feather acted similarly to other jazz impresarios, like John Hammond: As Hairston writes, Hammond’s championing of Black artists competed uncomfortably with his “imperialistic need to be ‘discoverer’ and cultural translator of their art form,” resulting in his primitivizing those artists.²⁶ Likewise, Feather’s columns often focused on introducing his audiences to jazzwomen they should know about, while simultaneously highlighting some features of their physical appearance: Beryl Booker was not a newcomer to the scene, “although she looks about 19”; Norma Carson was “a good-looking redhead who sings”; at age 30, Mary Osborne still had “youth and beauty and talent, but it is hard to say how long those qualities will endure before she can be considered to have missed the gravy train forever”; Bonnie Wetzel “is lovely to behold; for though she may not be the greatest bass player in the world, she is almost certainly the prettiest”; and on his descriptions go. Feather was obviously not the only jazz writer to comment on or lead with women’s looks or beauty in his descriptions of their music. As such, these examples point to the rampant sexism of the early 1950s, as well as Feather’s awareness of how women were typically packaged and sold in jazz, and further, his own need to frame them within the same language and narratives. Ultimately, Feather struggled to position women within a music industry that operated on such a stark gender binary between jazz as art (masculine) and jazz as sexualized commercial product (feminine). Their success relied at least in part on their ability to remain “womanly” while performing something profoundly “unwomanly.”

Feather’s Gender Ignorance

Gender ignorance is a key feature of Feather and others’ patriarchal definitions of jazz mastery. For Feather, no higher compliment could be given to a woman than for male musicians to say, “She’s just like one of us.” This comment reveals the extent to which Feather privileged gender ignorance, or gender blindness, in promoting his chosen jazzwomen. While many readers may perhaps be more familiar with the phrase “colorblind,” and by association gender blind, I am using the phrases “race ignorant” and “gender ignorant” for two primary reasons. First, as many in dis/ability studies have argued, “colorblindness” maintains a “deficit notion of people with disabilities,” while race ignorance, or race evasiveness (another common substitution), destabilizes the connection between ability, lack,

²³Leonard Feather, “Feather’s Nest,” *Down Beat* 20, no. 16 (Aug. 8, 1953).

²⁴Diane Pecknold, “‘These Stupid Little Sounds in Her Voice’: Valuing and Vilifying the New Girl Voice,” in *Voicing Girlhood in Popular Music: Performance, Authority, Authenticity*, ed. Jacqueline Warwick and Allison Adrian (New York: Routledge, 2016), 77–98; Laurie Stras, *She’s So Fine: Reflections on Whiteness, Femininity, Adolescence and Class in 1960s Music* (Surrey, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2010); and Emmalouise St. Amand, “A Goldmine in Bobby Sox’: Annette Swinson Sings Black Girlhood in the 1950s,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 36, no. 1 (2024): 106–23.

²⁵Leonard Feather, “A Wailing Girl Trombonist: This Melba is a Peach,” *Down Beat* 23, no. 19 (September 19, 1956): 26.

²⁶Hairston, “Gender, Jazz, and the Popular Front,” 74.

and undesirability.²⁷ Second, and as scholars in both critical race studies and dis/ability studies argue, race ignorance and gender ignorance are, to me, more accurate descriptions of methods that buttress white supremacy: As I argue in my previous work, race ignorance, and specifically white racial ignorance, highlights the efforts it takes to not see race, efforts that often result in the maintenance of white supremacy.²⁸ Phrases like “ignorance” and “evasion” recognize and indeed highlight what sociologist Jennifer C. Muller refers to as an “epistemology of ignorance,” or “a process of knowing designed to produce not knowing,” within structural white supremacy.²⁹ Likewise, “gender ignorance” argues that to not recognize gender expression or gender identity, and that to not see gender inequity, is an active choice (regardless of the intent of the gender ignorant individual). Finally, both the absence and the abundant presence of race-talk or gender-talk can reflect race/gender ignorant reinforcement of white patriarchal supremacy: 1) colorblind rhetoric, in which the colorblind individual deems any conversation about race (even critical conversations about racial inequity) as racist, is one form of race ignorance, as the colorblind individual chooses ignorance of racist realities; and 2) as I argue, Feather’s pervasive commentary surrounding gender, as well as his approach to “proving” gender equality, relies on an erasure of gender inequities similar to colorblind rhetoric.

As John Gennari, Ingrid Monson, Mikkel Vad, and others have pointed out, Feather’s ultimate method of attempting to eliminate race bias in jazz was by introducing a more colorblind, or race-ignorant, perspective, demonstrated even as he frequently stressed the importance of interracial collaboration in jazz.³⁰ Similarly, Feather at times seemed to champion a gender ignorant approach to gender discrimination, especially when quoting musicians with whom he spoke.³¹ For example, in discussing the 1948 *Girls in Jazz* album he produced, he wrote, “Talking to the girls during these sessions, I found that their ideas and ambitions were just like those of male musicians, except that they were also fighting for acceptance in the broadest sense and not just for their curiosity value . . . They want to be judged by all-around musical standards; and, after listening . . . I’m sure you’ll agree that their attitude is fully justified.”³² Feather reasserts that there *are* objective qualities that define good music, and further, that these women meet them. To be successful, jazz women needed to be distinguished as artists and marketable as products, balancing beauty with a more “serious” approach

²⁷I use the phrase “race/gender ignorant,” as opposed to “race/gender evasive,” for two primary reasons: 1) choosing one allows for terminological simplicity; and 2) ignorance is, to me, much easier to define, particularly as it places the onus for being uneducated on the race/gender ignorant individual themselves.

Subini Ancy Annamma, Darrell D. Jackson, and Deb Morrison, “Conceptualizing color-evasiveness: using dis/ability critical race theory to expand a color-blind racial ideology in education and society,” *Race, Ethnicity and Education* 20, no. 2 (November 2016): 147–62. See also: Subini Ancy Annamma, David Connor, and Beth Ferry, “Dis/Ability Critical Race Studies (DisCrit): Theorizing at the Intersections of Race and Dis/Ability,” *Race, Ethnicity and Education* 16, no. 1 (2013): 1–31; and Ivan Eugene Watts and Nirmala Erelles, “These Deading Times: Reconceptualizing School Violence by Using Critical Race Theory and Disability Studies,” *American Educational Research Journal* 41, no. 2 (2004): 217–99.

²⁸Charles Mills, “White Ignorance,” in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, ed. Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 11–38; John Fiske, *Media Matters: Race and Gender in U.S. Politics*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); and Kelsey Klotz, *Dave Brubeck and the Performance of Whiteness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

²⁹Jennifer C. Mueller, “Producing Colorblindness: Everyday Mechanisms of White Ignorance,” *Social Problems* 64, no. 2 (May 2017): 220.

³⁰Gennari, *Blowin’ Hot and Cool*, 56; Ingrid Monson, *Freedom Sounds: Civil Rights Call Out to Jazz and Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 66–106; Mikkel Vad, “Whiteness and the Problem of Colourblind Listening: Revisiting Leonard Feather’s 1951 Blindfold Test with Roy Eldridge,” *Twentieth-Century Music* 22, no. 1 (2024): 1–28.

³¹Feather often equated gender discrimination with racial discrimination—no doubt a more familiar form of discrimination for many mid-century jazz readers. In discussing *Girls in Jazz*, an album he produced in 1948, he explained that “Strangely enough, sex prejudice has done almost as much in its way to thwart the girl musician as race bias has done to suppress the Negro.” Elsewhere, he wrote of Norma Carson, “Segregation and discrimination by sex, as well as by race, can be a vicious handicap to the career of a girl musician.” Leonard Feather, “Girls in Jazz,” liner notes for Vivien Garry Quintet, Mary Lou Williams Girl Stars, Mary Lou Williams Trio, The Sweethearts of Rhythm, and the Beryl Booker Trio, *Girls in Jazz*, RCA Victor, HJ-11, 1948, 78 RPM; and Leonard Feather, “Girls In Jazz: This Chick Plays Like Navarro,” *Down Beat* 18, no. 7 (April 6, 1951): 3.

³²Vivien Garry Quintet, Mary Lou Williams Girl Stars, Mary Lou Williams Trio, The Sweethearts of Rhythm, and the Beryl Booker Trio, *Girls in Jazz*, RCA Victor HJ-1, 1948, 78 RPM.

that often had no room for beauty. This tension reveals the underlying impossibility of Feather's positioning of women as commercially viable within a field that increasingly valued high art narratives.

Feather often reinforced his gender ignorant support for particular women by comparing them to well-known male jazz musicians, or by explaining the levels of support or mentorship women had received from male jazz musicians. To name just a few examples: Norma Carson could "play the coolest trumpet this side of Miles Davis"; Coleman Hawkins, Roy Eldridge, or Ed Safranski would praise Marian McPartland as "a fine, swinging pianist and one of the most talented girls in jazz"; Duke Ellington, Billy Strayhorn, and Erroll Garner were all admirers of Beryl Booker's playing; and Bonnie Wetzel was "good enough to have worked with such leaders as Tommy Dorsey, and with the jazz combos of Red Rodney and Roy Eldridge." These comparisons do more than justify these women's skills: they recognize and uphold men as the dominant purveyors of mastery in jazz. However, Feather likely understood these comparisons as supporting his advocacy: these relatively unknown women were not only just as good as well-known men, but those men even recognized their abilities. Feather carried this gender ignorant method of comparison through many of the records he produced featuring women, especially *Cats vs. Chicks* (1954), *Melba Liston and her 'Bones* (1959), and *Bird Call* (1962).³³

The Albums

Cats vs. Chicks (1954) is an unfortunately named album in which Feather set up a contest between an all-male combo (Clark Terry, Cal Barlow, Oscar Pettiford, Kenny Clarke, Horace Silver, Lucky Thompson, Urbie Green, Percy Heath) and an all-female combo (Terry Pollard, Mary Osborne, Beryl Booker, Norma Carson, Elaine Leighton, Bonnie Wetzel, Corky Hecht Hale). Though the match was described as equal, the defining terms were anything but: cats, a common referent for expert male jazz musicians within jazz, on one side, and chicks, a dismissive term used broadly across society to refer to young women, on the other. The battle was imagined as a boxing match, in which each combo played the same song and three critics determined the winner. The liner notes offered a "blow-by-blow account of the proceedings," with each round dedicated to one song, and Feather narrated each bout athletically, noting punches, blows, and hooks. The critics (referee Leonard Feather, and judges Nat Hentoff and Barry Ulanov) offered their score cards, which resulted in a "split decision in favor of Miss Pollard" (though Ulanov, insisting "he is no male chauvinist," gave all rounds to the men). As a result of her win, Pollard was invited back to the "ring" to perform "with two sturdy male contenders, bassist Ernie Farrow and drummer Frank Di Vito" to play four more tunes, in which Pollard once again "proved," to Feather at least, that her skills were beyond gendered recognition.

That Feather and other critics viewed and pitched this record much like the 1973 Battle of the Sexes between tennis players Billie Jean King and Bobby Riggs would later be marketed was clear in the framing, conclusion, and reviews. Feather's liner notes conclude with yet another gender ignorant assertion that simultaneously attempts to support Pollard:

I don't know whether you will arrive at any personal verdict after an inspection of the rival contributions of the cats and chicks on these sides, but one conclusion can certainly be reached by all: jazz today has some front-rank representatives irrespective of sex, and in particular, Miss Pollard, who won the *Down Beat* critics' poll in 1956 as the greatest new star on vibes, will not have long to wait before her efforts are rewarded by international fame.³⁴

Likewise, Nat Hentoff's three-star review introduces the album using gender as its only lens: "Leonard Feather's latest tournament takes on a Simone de Beauvoir perspective—are women jazz musicians always to be regarded as genderically [sic] inferior to their male associates?"³⁵ He identifies the male

³³Clark Terry and His Septet, Terry Pollard and Her Septet, *Cats vs. Chicks (A Jazz Battle of the Sexes)*, MGM Records E255, 1954, LP; Melba Liston, *Melba Liston And Her 'Bones*, Metrojazz SE1013, 1958, LP; Vi Redd, *Bird Call*, UAJ 14016, 1962, LP.

³⁴Leonard Feather, "Cats vs. Chicks," liner notes for Terry Pollard, Clark Terry, and others, *Cats vs. Chicks*, E255, 1954, LP.

³⁵Nat Hentoff, "Review of *Cats vs. Chicks*," *Down Beat* 21, no. 20 (October 6, 1954): 12.

musicians as “male” while the female musicians are “suffragettes,” though it is unlikely that the women had any say in the women’s rights, battle-like setup of the album. In other words, the work this album does is defined only in terms of its gender work—it professes no other value to any broader jazz community. Key to jazz patriarchy’s survival is its unnamed maleness; when gender is named (when its gender inequality can no longer be ignored), it is more easily excluded than recognized within canons of mastery.

Although Feather attempted to set up the match (or at least frame it) as fairly as possible, and with an eye particularly to Terry Pollard’s potential future career, the male musicians (especially Terry, Pettiford, Clarke, Silver, Thompson, and Heath) are typically more easily remembered and revered by students of jazz today (which is underscored when Hentoff’s review particularly calls out Terry and Clarke as being “a league or two beyond Miss Carson” and “several light years beyond Miss Leighton,” respectively).³⁶ Women may have won this particular battle, but Feather’s work could not circumvent jazz patriarchy’s larger war on women. Finally, the album’s cover art seems to feature a white male trumpeter and a white female vibraphonist facing off, though Terry is a Black trumpeter and Pollard a Black vibraphonist, which further suggests that the value of this album lay more in its commercial interest, and perhaps even a broader white societal interest in similar man vs. woman displays of skill (or lack thereof).

In two later albums he produced featuring individual women, Feather likewise extensively used comparison to promote gender ignorance, an approach that mostly succeeded in obscuring the women’s individual sounds in favor of proving they could play as well as the men referenced. *Melba Liston and her ‘Bones* (1958) features Melba Liston as leader, trombonist, and arranger alongside a slew of male trombonists: Jimmy Cleveland, Bennie Green, Al Grey, Slide Hampton, Benny Powell, and Frank Rehak trade off on the album’s eight tracks. Each track features at least three trombonists (one of which is always Liston). As a gender project (which Feather clearly positions it as in the liner notes) the effect disguises Liston as an undefinable trombone voice in a sea of trombone sounds, which further proves Feather’s point, albeit in a commercially curious way for a feature album: that it is so difficult to distinguish Liston’s sound undeniably proves that she is capable of being judged by the same standards.³⁷

Likewise, *Bird Call* (1962) features Vi Redd, an alto saxophonist and vocalist who had already been compared to Charlie Parker in reviews of her live performances (the liner notes quote John Tynan, who wrote that she played a “bushel barrel of raw, gusty Charlie Parker-derived horn”).³⁸ If the album title were not enough of an homage to Charlie Parker, the tunes further embed Redd within his lineage: All but one of the album’s ten tunes were either written or performed by Parker, and the one that was not was a Leonard Feather original titled “I Remember Bird” written for the session. Feather’s liner notes reflect Redd’s ambivalence about being so tightly tied to Parker: “Vi was a little perturbed lest the average listener draw the inference that she is ‘trying to copy Bird,’ which was not her intention.” He assures the listener (and perhaps Redd) that “though her natural alto sound, as well as her phrasing and ideas, have a great deal in common with Parker’s, there was no deliberate attempt at imitation.” That Redd voiced this discomfort to Feather (and that this discomfort ended up in the notes) suggests that the tunes on this date were not entirely her choice.

³⁶Hentoff again explains that he gave the win narrowly to the women, and he metes out individual criticisms and compliments fairly evenly. The final paragraph, however, sees a shift in which Hentoff clarifies that while the women may have won as a combo, in “individual position battles,” Clark Terry “is a league or two beyond Miss Carson (competent as she is), and in the percussion . . . Klook [Kenny Clarke] is several light years beyond Miss Leighton. Elaine’s all right, but Klook, after all, is one of the greatest drummers in all of jazz history.” Hentoff, “Review of *Cats vs. Chicks*,” 12.

³⁷Of course, J.J. Johnson and Kai Winding were two other trombones whose albums reflected a “sea of trombone sounds” in the 1950s.

³⁸Quoted in Leonard Feather, liner notes for Vi Redd, *Bird Call*, Vi Redd, UAJ 14016, 1962, LP. Feather also consistently compared Redd to Melba Liston, in both a feature and in the liner notes to *Bird Call*. Leonard Feather, “Focus On: Alto Saxophonist, Soprano Saxophonist, Vocalist Vi Redd,” *Down Beat* 29, no. 24 (September 1962): 23.

As Christopher Robinson writes, *Bird Call* was not an economic success.³⁹ Nevertheless, Feather attempted to secure a second recording contract on Redd's behalf with United Artists. As he had in columns promoting women for the previous two decades, Feather's letters to Art Talmadge of United Artists (who had the option to produce and release a second album by Redd) demonstrate Feather's understanding of success within the jazz market: according to Robinson, he "emphasized Redd's possible pop success as a singer" and blamed the cover of *Bird Call*, which he called "terrible" and said did not make "Vi look as attractive as she really is."⁴⁰ Talmadge ultimately passed on the option, and Redd soon was offered a nine-month contract with Atlantic Records from Nesuhi Ertegun, without his ever having heard her, and based on Feather's recommendation alone.⁴¹ Redd's second album, *Lady Soul* (1963), was a more vocally-oriented album, which Yoko Suzuki argues reflects a more traditional approach to gender within the recording industry (whether that focus came from Feather or Ertegun is unknown, though Suzuki cites drummer Dave Bailey as recalling that Ertegun selected the tunes for that album).⁴²

Not only was Feather a producer, some level of promoter, and liner notes writer, but he also received songwriting credits on each of these albums. Feather received two writing credits on both *Melba Liston and her 'Bones* and *Bird Call* (for "Pow!" and "The Dark Before the Dawn" on the former, and "I'd Rather Have a Memory Than a Dream" and "I Remember Bird" for the latter), and one writing credit on *Cats vs. Chicks* (the opening track, "Cat Meets Chick"). Additionally, Feather wrote "Pow!", "I Remember Bird," and likely "Cat Meets Chick" specifically for these albums. Given that Liston, a composer and arranger, also received only two writing credits on her album, it seems that Feather was significantly invested in promoting his own voice on albums that purportedly celebrated Liston, Redd, and other women's voices.

As Robinson argues, Feather made Redd (and other women's) "music available to the public, but in ways that reinforced dominant gender ideologies."⁴³ But Feather went far beyond simply making these albums available and framing them within 1950s gender ideologies. In the "comparison" set up of each of these albums (*Cats vs. Chicks*, *Melba Liston and her 'Bones*, and *Bird Call*), Feather deliberately obscures players' timbre to demonstrate that jazzwomen are valid because they have no sonic difference from jazzmen; therefore, they should be accepted within canons of jazz mastery, when they deserve it (which he, of course, is able to arbitrate). By equating them with men and refusing simple human and/or timbral identification, his gender ignorant approach obscures these women's individual voices and further demonstrates how jazz mastery requires gender ignorance. While he had, as a connoisseur, selected particular women to promote, he nevertheless unquestioningly accepted definitions of mastery embedded within jazz patriarchy in their promotion. Indeed, the act of connoisseurship, embedded as it is in white patriarchal systems of individual mastery, prevented him from producing and promoting these albums, and the women they featured, in any other way.

Jutta Hipp

For a few years in the mid-1950s, Leonard Feather went all in on one woman musician in particular: a German pianist named Jutta Hipp. His sudden pursuit of Hipp, and his equally sudden lack of interest in her, makes for a curiously unknowable story that nevertheless demonstrates the amount of power and influence Feather had, or was perceived to have. Hipp began to appear in the pages of *Down Beat* in 1952 as part of Hans Koller's combo, and by 1954, Feather had organized a European tour featuring Billie Holiday and Beryl Booker with performances in Germany and finally heard her live for himself: he wrote in the familiar language of jazz patriarchy, "The girl is a looker, plays brilliant piano, and

³⁹Christopher Robinson, "Firing the Canon: Multiple Insularities in Jazz Criticism" (PhD diss, University of Kansas, 2014).

⁴⁰Robinson, "Firing the Canon," 106; Letter from Leonard Feather to Art Talmadge, 6 November 1963, box 16, folder 7, Writing Files, LGFPC, as quoted in Robinson, "Firing the Canon," 106.

⁴¹Robinson, "Firing the Canon," 100.

⁴²Yoko Suzuki, "Invisible Woman: Vi Redd's Contributions as a Jazz Saxophonist," *American Music Review* XLII, no. 2 (Spring 2013): 1–6.

⁴³Robinson, "Firing the Canon," 108.

(as Lionel Hampton has already told Joe Glaser) is a cinch to make it in the States.”⁴⁴ Soon, other *Down Beat* columnists began to champion her; in 1954, Nat Hentoff quoted German jazz critic Ernest Borneman at length, who described her in highly gendered terms focusing on her beauty and almost exotic (though still white), ethereal approach:

A small, pale, beautiful girl, with vast, sad eyes and a figure so fragile that you don't believe her capable of the fabulous noise she gets out of the piano. She has the air of a wraith lost in this world of wicked men and incomprehensible doings . . . She sits at the piano, absolutely unmoving . . . never betraying, even by the slightest movement . . . of her shoulders, that her arms and hands are flicking about the keyboard at Tatum speed. When I saw her she wore a man's old checked shirt, jeans and bobby sox . . . her piano technique ran from a fiercely masculine jump style to rapid, Bud Powellish right-hand patterns.⁴⁵

When it became clear that Hipp would soon travel to the United States, Feather published a letter he had written to her upon her emigration, warning her of booking agents and male nightclub owners who may ask her to change (particularly in ways that related to her gender): “Some may tell you to smile or play more melodically or change your repertoire, or even cut your hair shorter (don't ever do it!), and in some cases you may have to go along with them.”⁴⁶ Before signing off, he noted that the last musician he had sponsored in the United States was the well-known British pianist, George Shearing, suggesting that if she followed Feather's lead, she, too, might become as famous.

Once in the States, however, Hipp's once rapturous reviews suddenly ceased. Critics now believed her to be lost in a tug-of-war between the styles of two prominent jazzmen. In a review of a live performance at the Hickory House, Hentoff bemoaned that Hipp had lost her uniqueness (reminiscent, to him, of Lennie Tristano) and was now too much like Horace Silver, though she missed the “lyricism and tenderness that are co-equal with wailing guts in Horace's work.”⁴⁷ He continued with a lengthy critique, ending by saying that the Hickory House is tough, and “it is a particularly difficult growing place for a girl who is still searching for herself.” Shortly thereafter, Feather wrote a column that in part insisted, “I agree with every word of Nat's recent criticism of Jutta Hipp; moreover, I can't understand why after all these months she's still using her fine drummer and bassist as accompanists, instead of really forming a trio.”⁴⁸

The negative reviews from *Down Beat* writers continued from there: In a 1956 album review, Hentoff again complained that Hipp had lost her style and sounded too much like Silver (“no longer immediately identifiable by her former linear, lyrical musical personality, Jutta sounds here like a promising eclectic marked most by Horace Silver”), but that the group had a “good sound and a most attractive cover” (a compliment directed more toward Reid K. Miles, Francis Wolff, Rudy Van Gelder, and Alfred Lion, the cover designer, photographer, recording engineer, and producer).⁴⁹ Hentoff bemoaned that she had lost her former “engaging touch with ballads,” and instead played with “hardness-without-exuberance”: “For example, she may be *Mad About the Boy*, but why should she attack him?” Such descriptions suggest that Hentoff struggled to understand Hipp's sound in terms of jazz mastery as she transitioned away from more lyrical, “feminine” ballads toward “funkier,” more aggressive (perhaps more “masculine”) styles. By 1959, Hipp was transitioning to a non-jazz life and working in a dress shop, where she earned a steady \$55 per week. A short report in *Down Beat* from 1962 confirmed that she was officially retired from performance and quoted her as saying she “will never again appear in public. I only want to write and draw for my own pleasure.”⁵⁰

⁴⁴Leonard Feather, “Jazz Club' Europe Tour Finds Willing Audiences,” *Down Beat* 21, no. 5 (March 10, 1954): 15.

⁴⁵Ernest Borneman, as quoted in Nat Hentoff, “Counterpoint,” *Down Beat* 21, no. 22 (November 3, 1954): 6.

⁴⁶Leonard Feather, “Feather's Nest,” *Down Beat* 23, no. 2 (January 25, 1956): 26.

⁴⁷Nat Hentoff, “Caught in the Act: Jutta Hipp: Hickory House, New York,” *Down Beat* 23, no. 9 (May 2, 1956): 8.

⁴⁸Leonard Feather, “Feather's Nest,” *Down Beat* 23, no. 14 (July 11, 1956): 33. The album is a live recording of Hipp's Hickory House gig; the first track features Feather introducing the combo.

⁴⁹Nat Hentoff, “Caught in the Act: Jutta Hipp: Hickory House, New York,” *Down Beat* 23, no. 9 (May 2, 1956): 8.

⁵⁰News, *Down Beat* 29, no. 20 (July 19, 1962): 61.

Katja von Schuttenbach has noted the significant shift in Feather's enthusiasm about Hippi as demonstrated in Feather's entries on her in the different editions of his *Encyclopedia of Jazz*.⁵¹ Indeed, the difference between the 1955 and 1956 entries is stark: In 1955, Feather offered a concise but dramatic biographical account of her flight from Russian occupation in World War II and referred to her as "a brilliant musician" influenced by Lennie Tristano. By contrast, in 1956, Feather simply noted that Hippi arrived in the U.S. in 1955, before explaining, "Her style underwent a change as a result of her enthusiasm for Horace Silver, which destroyed some of the individuality she had shown in her work in Germany."⁵² Von Schuttenbach suggests that "It appears that the unwilling and resisting Hippi had turned from protégée to persona non grata for Feather within months after her arrival. He retaliated by writing negatively about Hippi in his still widely read encyclopedias and personal memoir, even claiming that Horace Silver's influence had destroyed Hippi's playing style."⁵³ Different sources attribute this turnaround to a variety of reasons: von Schuttenbach suggests, based on interviews with musicians who played with Hippi at the time, that Feather may have been romantically interested in Hippi and she rejected him; another theory is that Hippi may have, in late 1956, refused to record songs Feather had written (a move Liston and Redd had wisely not made); still another is that after living through World War II in Germany and giving a baby (whose father was a Black American GI) up for adoption, Hippi suffered from a combination of post-traumatic stress disorder and/or stage fright. When looking back at Hippi's career in a 1987 retrospective, Feather laid primary blame on Hippi, explaining simply that her "personality was a major problem."⁵⁴

We cannot know what may have happened between Feather and Hippi, a silence that reverberates throughout many women's histories. As Tucker writes, "Stories of jazz community . . . usually also include stories of exclusion and marginalization from jazz community."⁵⁵ Whether as a result of power imbalances, or beliefs about whose story might be trusted, or family care needs (whether for children, male partners, or siblings/parents/others), or exhaustion with the situation and a need for a clean break, women often left jazz or were written out of jazz (whether permanently or temporarily) with little to no explanation;⁵⁶ alternatively, jazzwomen at times turned toward teaching in what Vanessa Blais-Tremblay describes as a "willful orientation toward care-work, rather than as a failure of musicianship, a failure of gender management, or a failure to overcome race- and class-based oppression."⁵⁷ While we know her early jazz education in Germany during World War II was at first limited to contraband albums, there is little knowledge of what if any mentorship Hippi might have received upon coming to the United States and immediately being propelled into Feather's spotlight. What we do know, however, suggests that Feather understood how much power and control he had to potentially create careers and deem mastery, and further, that he could deny such support when he believed a musician no longer merited it. His role was not, ultimately, to advocate for these women or to advocate for a systemic shift in jazz patriarchy, but rather to patronize them: to identify women and the ways in which they could fit within jazz's pre-existing economic and patriarchal system—a process that ultimately sustained jazz patriarchy in part through a gender ignorant jazz mastery.

⁵¹Katja von Schuttenbach, "Jutta Hippi: The Inside Story," interview with Marc Myers, *Jazz Wax* (May 28, 2013), <https://www.jazzwax.com/2013/05/index.html>.

⁵²Leonard Feather, *The Encyclopedia of Jazz* (New York: Horizon, 1956), 125.

⁵³Katja von Schuttenbach in *Jazz Podium* "Jutta Hippi in Germany: 1952–55," translated by Marc Myers, *JazzWax* (May 22, 2013), <https://www.jazzwax.com/2013/05/jutta-hippi.html>.

⁵⁴Feather, *The Jazz Years*, 160.

⁵⁵Tucker, "Bordering on Community," 244.

⁵⁶For example, both Melba Liston and Mary Lou Williams (among others) stepped away from their careers at various points. See further: Tammy L. Kernodle, "Black Women Working Together: Jazz, Gender, and the Politics of Validation," *Black Music Research Journal* 34, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 27–55; and Tammy L. Kernodle, *Soul on Soul: The Life and Music of Mary Lou Williams* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2004).

⁵⁷Vanessa Blais-Tremblay, "'Where You Are Accepted, You Blossom': Toward Care Ethics in Jazz Historiography," *Jazz & Culture* 2 (2019): 71. Emphasis original.

Blindfold Tests

However she left the jazz scene, comparisons to men were a contradictory death knell to Hipp's career; while it was fine for her to sound comparable to Bud Powell or Lennie Tristano, critics attacked her for sounding too much like Horace Silver. But perhaps the arena in which Feather believed he could use comparison in a pseudo-scientific, gender ignorant way to truly dismantle gender differences in jazz was the Blindfold Test. Other scholars have documented how Feather used blindfold tests to promote a colorblind, or color ignorant, discourse that separated jazz from blackness (particularly in the infamous 1951 test featuring Roy Eldridge).⁵⁸ But the tests also starkly reveal the extent to which jazz patriarchy had embedded itself in the ears of nearly everyone engaged in the jazz scene—including Feather himself. He was particularly known for these tests, in which an invited musician listened to a number of records (all chosen by Feather) without knowing any of the album information. The musician was asked to guess who might be playing, comment on the recordings, and rate them on a scale of 0–5 stars. It was a pseudo-scientific method crafted to hear musicians' subjective opinions in a fake "objective" manner, and in particular, allowed Feather to control the settings by which he could, at times, contradict musicians' raced and gendered assumptions about jazz. As Mikkel Vad writes, Feather's blindfold tests "present listening as a technical skill imbued with rationality and analytic thought," taking on the "de-racialized identity of a jazz scientist who simply recorded the results of an exam."⁵⁹ Simply put, the framing of the test positioned Feather as curator, knower, and master. But if Feather attempted to cloak himself in race ignorance, the blindfold tests benefited from his explicit position within jazz patriarchy—a white man, whose capable objectivity and jazz mastery, demonstrated through his technical methods, was imbued with authority through records and recordings in particular.

As Feather recounts, this feature was a direct response to the gender discrimination against pianist Una Mae Carlisle he observed in the late 1930s. In his first article on her, he wrote, "How would you like to submit to a blindfold test, listen to a typical Fats Waller song, then when the bandage was removed find that seated at the keyboard, instead of the 200 pounds of brown-skinned masculinity you expected, was a light, slim, smiling girl?"⁶⁰ The first blindfold test he ever gave, for *Metronome* magazine in 1946, was administered to Mary Lou Williams. Nevertheless, using the tests, Feather relies on white- and male-coded methods associated with scientific inquiry crafted to create "gotcha" moments that positioned himself as the all-knowing curator and the participant as either inside or outside the rarefied space of the jazz canon.

A review of Feather's blindfold tests in *Down Beat* between 1951–1963 suggests that in the areas Feather could control (such as participants invited or records played), he attempted to include women.⁶¹ Figure 1 shows the total number of participants in the Blindfold Tests by gender, and Figure 2 shows the total number of records played by Feather for participants in Blindfold Tests by gender. In each, we see a significantly higher number of male participation, but frankly, the 9–11% range for women is not as bad as one might expect for this period. However, a closer look at what records were given to which participants reveal how even Feather's attempts at promoting women participants and records were subject to his implicit bias.

Figure 3 shows the number of female participants who were given records featuring women in blindfold tests, and Figure 4 shows the number of male participants who were given records featuring women in blindfold tests. Nearly every woman was given records featuring women to review, whereas only 27% of the male participants were given records featuring women to review. The disparity between how many women and men participants received records featuring women can largely, though not

⁵⁸Ingrid Monson, *Freedom Sounds*, 80; Guthrie Ramsey, Jr., "Who Hears Here? Black Music, Critical Bias, and the Musicological Skin Trade," *Musical Quarterly* 85/1 (2001), 1–52; and Vad, "Whiteness and the Problem of Colourblind Listening."

⁵⁹Vad, "Whiteness and the Problem of Colourblind Listening," 17, 20.

⁶⁰As quoted in Feather, *The Jazz Years*, 127.

⁶¹This review was based on the issues available in the RIPM Jazz database; their coverage of *Down Beat* ends in 1963.

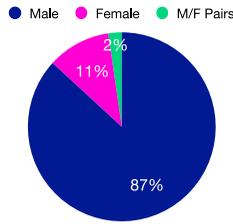


Figure 1. Participants in Blindfold Tests by gender, 1951–1963.

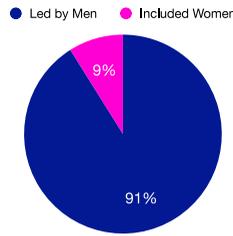


Figure 2. Records played in Blindfold Tests by gender of performer, 1951–1963.

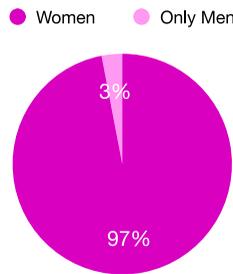


Figure 3. Number of female participants given records featuring women.

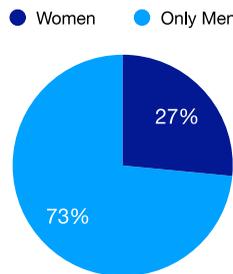


Figure 4. Number of male participants given records featuring men.

wholly, be attributed to Feather’s method of choosing records: for participants who were singers, he often chose singers, a category dominated by women during this period (26 of the 33 female participants in the blindfold test were vocalists).⁶² Finally, the average number of records featuring women given to women (Figure 5) was significantly higher than the number given to men (Figure 6).

⁶²Five were instrumentalists (Marian McPartland, Jutta Hipp, Toshiko Akiyoshi, Barbara Carroll, and Hazel Scott) and two were non-performing members of the music industry (Dorothy Kilgallen and Elaine Lorillard).



Figure 5. Average number of records featuring women given to women.



Figure 6. Average number of records featuring women given to men.

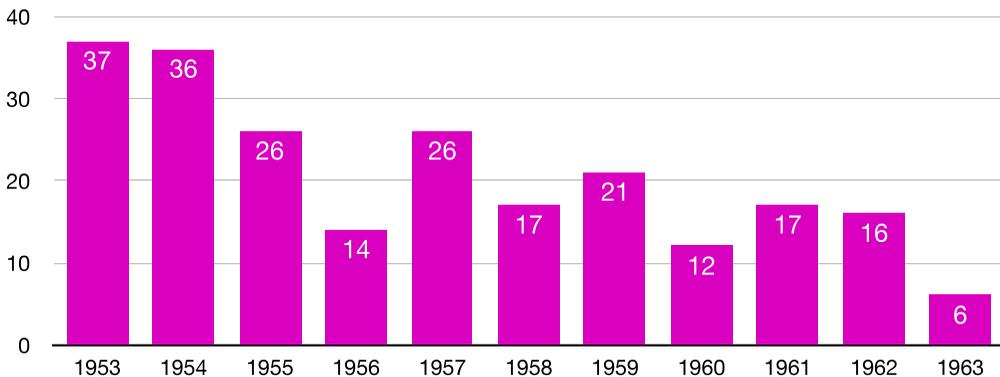


Figure 7. Total number of records given that feature women in Blindfold Tests, 1953–1963.

In summary: 1) far more men were given blindfold tests than women; 2) far more records featuring only men were given in blindfold tests; 3) women nearly always received records by women to comment upon; and 4) women almost always received higher numbers of records featuring women than men did.

A year-by-year analysis demonstrates how Feather's blindfold tests were also susceptible to the shifting gendered landscape of jazz as the music increasingly left the commercial sphere and entered the realm of art discourse (Figure 7). Across the decade between 1953–1963, the total number of records given featuring women trends significantly downward, from a high mark of 37 to a low mark of 6—a decrease of 84%.⁶³ Similarly, the number of female participants in blindfold tests trends downward across the decade (Figure 8). As I explain in another part of this project, this is directly related to the overall masculinization of jazz as artists and critics further embedded jazz within art discourse and distanced jazz from the more feminine sphere of commercialism.

⁶³The number of total Blindfold Tests given in 1951 and 1952 varies significantly; by 1953, every issue of *Down Beat* featured a Blindfold Test.

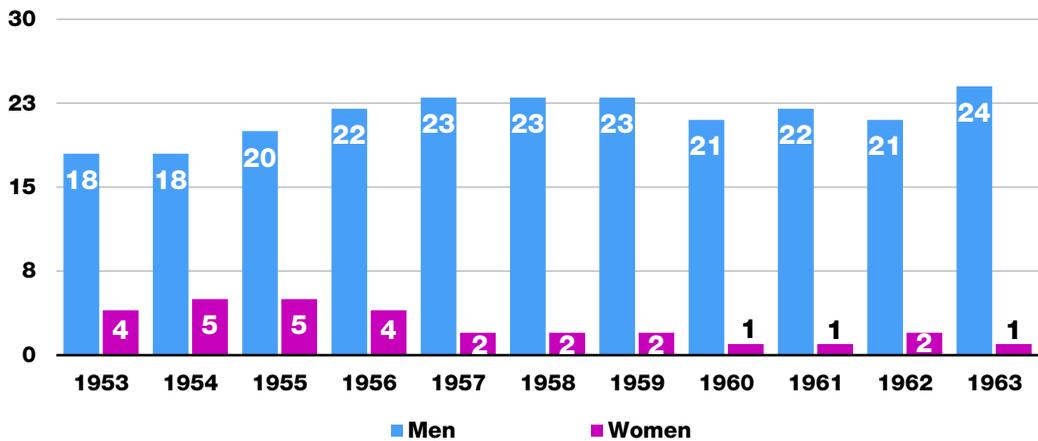


Figure 8. Total number of participants in Blindfold Tests by gender across 1953–1963.

The one element outside Feather’s control in the Blindfold Tests (indeed, the element that readers most responded to) were the participants’ guesses. Vocalists were significantly easier to guess by gender; however, very few musicians correctly guessed women instrumentalists. I have found just 3 in this period, out of a total of 303 tests reviewed.⁶⁴ Every other incorrect guess or attribution of style to a particular person, no matter the gender of the participant, was a man. Of all 303 tests, only one guest incorrectly guessed a woman when given a record by a male performer.⁶⁵ As Robinson argues, Feather seems to think, in these moments, that he is proving that “gender is inaudible” in jazz.⁶⁶ However, the fact that the default musician was in almost every example a man demonstrates how fully embedded jazz patriarchy was in the ears and imaginations of its practitioners.

A key case in point is the Blindfold Test given to Barbara Carroll in 1954, which in many ways is a gender analog to the Roy Eldridge Blindfold Test, in which Feather attempted to demonstrate jazz’s colorblindness/race ignorance. As Feather explained, “This was a unique *Blindfold Test*—all girl records, reviewed by an all-girl listener” (though of course Carroll was not told this ahead of time).⁶⁷ Of the eight records she was given, she only correctly guessed Marian McPartland; of the remaining seven, she compared five to male players and two were left gender-neutral. At the end of the test, Feather revealed his trick:

L.F.: Now what would you say if I told you that every solo you’ve heard on this blindfold test—piano, vibes, everything else, has been by a girl?

Barbara: . . . Well, I’d say great! You mean *every one* was by a girl?

L.F.: Are you pleasantly surprised?

Barbara: I certainly am! That’s what you get for working with male musicians—you don’t know what the girls can do . . . Well all I can say is, I’m proud of them!

⁶⁴In 1952 Marian McPartland correctly guessed Barbara Carroll, in 1954 Billy Taylor correctly guessed Beryl Booker, and in 1955 Ella Fitzgerald correctly guessed Barbara Carroll.

⁶⁵In 1956, Chico Hamilton was given ten records all featuring male musicians; on the excerpt by Shelly Manne and André Previn, he guessed that he might be hearing Jutta Hipp, whom he admitted he’d never heard before. Chico Hamilton, “Blindfold Test,” *Down Beat* 23, no. 21 (October 17, 1956): 29.

⁶⁶Robinson, “Firing the Canon,” 110.

⁶⁷Barbara Carroll, “Blindfold Test,” *Down Beat* 21, no. 25 (December 15, 1954):13.

As Robinson notes, Feather legitimized Carroll and other women musicians through this test in a number of ways: 1) by testing her at all; 2) by playing records by women; and 3) by demonstrating the inaudibility of gender.⁶⁸ Carroll is surprised, and her last statement immediately identifies why she failed: that by working primarily with male musicians, “you don’t know what the girls can do.” While mastery of a Blindfold Test may have meant a correct guess, it was only possible within a broader understanding of jazz mastery whose canons were entirely male: In this jazz patriarchal system, male musicians dominated the bandstand, the magazines, the records, the discographies, and even the perceptions and imaginations of musicians, regardless of their gender. As such, women musicians weren’t even second guessed—they simply were erased from the realm of possibility, in large part due to a gender ignorant approach that refused acknowledgment until the big reveal, which ultimately put Carroll’s ignorance, rooted as it was in patriarchy, on full display.

Feather Reflects

We could simply celebrate Feather’s work, which, though obviously flawed, was also remarkable for its time. But of the women whose careers he attempted to promote, only a handful have made it into standard jazz history texts, and almost none of them became well known beyond the most dedicated jazz fans. Even Feather seems not to understand these failures; he writes in his 1987 book, *The Jazz Years: Ear Witness to Jazz*, recalling his experience in the late 1930s with Una Mae Carlisle and Hazel Scott, “I made a conscious effort to correct what I now realized was a problem affecting women musicians. Only the singers and, to some extent, the pianists were able to overcome fixed attitudes on the part of those who were in a position to employ them.”⁶⁹ Interestingly, Feather placed blame for women’s absence on male musicians equally with producers.⁷⁰

In attempting to reconcile what he saw as their potential with their ultimate lack of success, Feather often blamed individual women: In addition to Jutta Hipp’s supposed personality issues, Carlisle lived a “lifestyle as self-indulgent as Fat’s [Waller]”; Scott was overtaken by Hollywood and later, her husband, reverend and United States representative Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., and ultimately seemed “more interested in listening to others”; and Barbara Carroll worked too regularly at “chic clubs on the East Side” and as a result, modified her style to something that “proved less and less interesting.” That many of these “issues” are coded as feminine failings seem to escape Feather’s notice. But still, there were the musicians whose lack of records and renown he never understood: Melba Liston was charming and successful in a “series of jobs in a male-dominated world,” including Dizzy Gillespie, Count Basie, and Billie Holiday; Vi Redd continued to be “judged as a novelty”; “not even Gillespie’s and Parker’s respect and recommendations eased the path” for Clora Bryant; and Stacy Rowles, a younger generation than almost everyone else Feather discusses in the book, told Feather, “I know there’s a lot of work out there that I’m capable of doing, but it’s a vicious circle. They don’t let me get the experience, then they’ll say they can’t hire me because I’m not experienced.” Feather comments, perhaps a bit tongue-in-cheek, that the reason she is never called for studio work “may not be due to any conscious sexism on the part of contractors, but it seems odd that so many of the ensembles seen in studios and nightclubs alike are overwhelmingly male and white.”

For Feather, women’s lack of success was primarily an individual issue: either certain women had flaws that got in the way (and therefore they did not meet the standards of excellence needed for jazz mastery), or particular men (whether as contractors, producers, or musicians) were sexist. In many ways, these women’s lack of success was the negative image of the “exceptional woman” narrative crafted for Mary Lou Williams, which, Hairston argues, demonstrates the extent to which

⁶⁸Robinson, “Firing the Canon,” 122.

⁶⁹Feather, *The Jazz Years*, 129.

⁷⁰However, he also recounted a story he originally published in 1962, in which, upon hearing Vi Redd, drummer Art Blakey attempted to connect Redd with a record producer, who told Blakey, “Yeah, but she’s a girl . . . Only two girls in jazz have ever really made it, Mary Lou Williams and Shirley Scott.” Feather, *The Jazz Years*, 160; and Leonard Feather, “Focus On: Alto Saxophonist, Soprano Saxophonist, Vocalist Vi Redd,” *Down Beat* 28, no. 24 (September 13, 1962): 23.

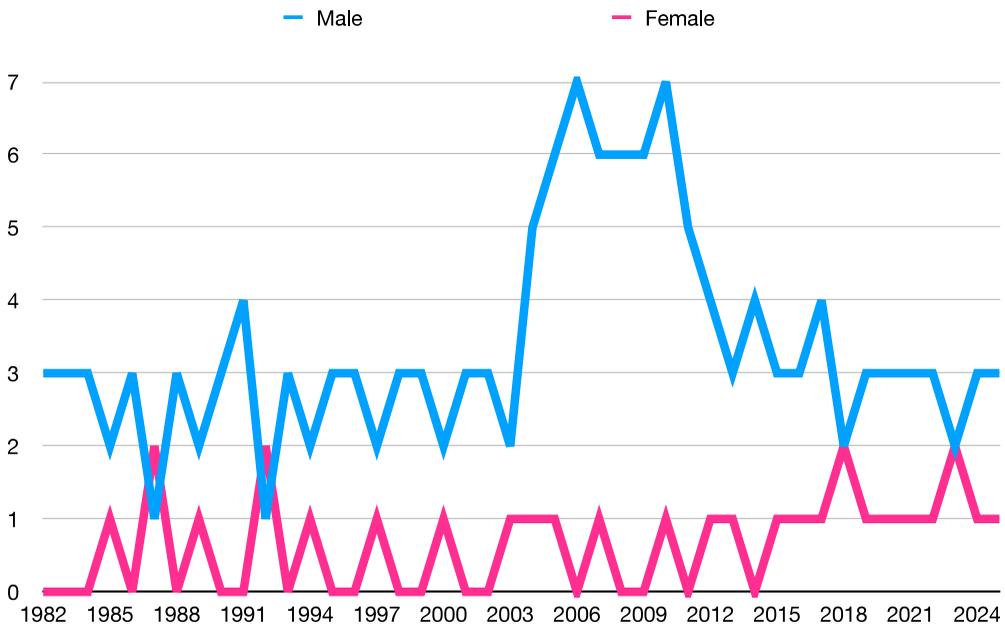


Figure 9. NEA Jazz Masters by Gender, 1982–2025.

“exceptionality in mainstream discourse is couched in gendered terms.”⁷¹ That the experiences of women denied, or of exceptional women, might be combined to illuminate a system of patriarchy endemic not only to the United States, but to jazz specifically, rarely makes an appearance. By denying or ignoring or simply not seeing patriarchy as the broader issue, Feather relied on white and male-centric privileges of individuality and access to excellence. In doing so, he failed to enact the broader change he seemed to desire and instead, actively upheld jazz’s patriarchal ballasts.

Conclusion

Ultimately, Feather demonstrates how recognition of a problem and ignorance of the same problem easily coexist in advocacy. Though Feather attempted to explain gender discrimination within the jazz field, he nevertheless positioned women within pre-existing gender ignorant jazz narratives for success and mastery—narratives he, as a leading critic, helped to create and promote; indeed, narratives in which he, as a critic, songwriter, and producer, was both emotionally and financially invested. Feather’s gender ignorant attempts to address gender discrimination did not reconsider the ways in which jazz’s metrics for success, standards for mastery, and approaches to connoisseurship were embedded within a broader story of jazz patriarchy.

Feather is not alone: other cultural arbiters likewise are better reflections of their cultural context than of any purported neutral or universal claim of jazz mastery. A year-by-year gender breakdown of the NEA Jazz Masters demonstrates the extent to which women’s inclusion has been a reactive assertion of mastery. Figure 9 shows the number of women and men who received the honor of an NEA Jazz Masters fellowship from its beginning to the most recent year at the time of publication (1982–2025).

Across the 43 years of the fellowship, there are only four years in which the number of women honored has either met or exceeded the number of men honored: 1987, 1992, 2018, and 2023. Each of these years occurred within a broader cultural context of support and crisis for women:

⁷¹Monica Hairston, “Gender, Jazz, and the Popular Front,” 76. See also: Kimberly Hannon Teal, “Mary Lou Williams As Apology: Jazz, History, and Institutional Sexism in the Twenty-First Century,” *Jazz & Culture* 2 (2019): 1–26.

- 1987 marked the year Public Law 100-9 was passed, designating March 1987 as “Women’s History Month” for the very first time.
- 1992 was dubbed the “Year of the Woman,” as a record number of women ran and won United States Senate seats in the aftermath of the Clarence Thomas Senate confirmation hearings in 1991.
- 2018 was the year after the first #metoo revelations came to light and the Iverson-Glasper “musical clitoris” debacle.
- 2023 was the first nominating year after the *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization* (2022) Supreme Court decision that overturned the *Roe v. Wade* (1973) decision.

Whether or not the arbiters of the NEA Jazz Master fellowships intended it, their choices clearly reflect the context within which they were made. However, the constant retrenchment that follows such moves demonstrates the extent to which such reactive and gender ignorant advocacy—that does not analyze and identify the broader gendered constructs of mastery and connoisseurship—can ultimately only fail to critique pre-existing, unchallenged, and undefined models of mastery.

Gender ignorance continues to define jazz mastery: When I review anonymous drafts of articles that uncritically use the term “jazz master,” or articles that fail to cite a single female author, or hear students use the term casually while simultaneously calling female authors “obnoxious” or failing to notice their own gender exclusive practices, I’m reminded of the historical weight the term “jazz master” and the pseudo-occupation of “connoisseur” carry, and more broadly, of the immense definitional power of jazz patriarchy. Collectively, experiences like these, combined with my lifelong experiences with others’ doubts regarding my own status in jazz, have given me a hefty sense of discomfort surrounding my authority to define who is a jazz master, what is a masterful performance, and so on. Every semester I put together a jazz history course, I ask myself anew, “what defines mastery this semester, for these students, for me?” And every semester, the answers change. Such a view of jazz mastery belies the typical objective or universal approach—that there is one canon to rule them all.

Other jazz scholars have reconsidered the related concept of “genius” within the genre: Nichole Rustin demonstrates that jazz genius has been invisibly structured by masculinity, and, citing Farah Jasmine Griffin’s compelling arguments for the canon of jazz genius to be expanded to include Billie Holiday, she examines how Mary Lou Williams’s genius disrupted jazz’s dominant masculinity.⁷² As Gabriel Solis writes concerning the term “genius,” “It is not sufficient to note that ‘great man’ historiography and the attendant notion of genius are part and parcel of the racist underbelly of the Enlightenment. The question is whether they may, if stripped of that baggage, serve some use.”⁷³ He adds that as listeners, consumers, and players, we have our own agency to understand these terms: “Although words and ideas come to us already populated, we can and do populate them with our own intentions all the time—we are not necessarily hamstrung by history”—but I’m not so sure.⁷⁴ “Mastery,” whether in the fields of teaching and education, artistic skill, or cultures of enslavement and colonization implies dominance—mastery *over* someone or something. Stinking of colonial and patriarchal excess, neither mastery nor connoisseurship have felt natural to me. They fit like a suit jacket without darts.

What use do we have for determinations of jazz mastery, then, in an age of increased recognition that hard work and a good ear won’t grant you the same ability to judge artistic value as Feather’s time did? What does the failed promise of a meritocratic jazz field offer instead? Solis suggests “the scene” as the site of jazz’s true canon of geniuses, arguing that “the scene is one of the most important social and musical units, more than the individual: that part of [Thelonious] Monk’s greatness is a direct result of the many approaches people have taken to his music over the years.”⁷⁵ Such an approach values jazz

⁷²Nichole T. Rustin, “‘Mary Lou Williams Plays Like a Man!’”; Farah Jasmine Griffin, *If You Can’t Be Free, Be a Mystery*. See also Guthrie Ramsey, “Making the Changes: Jazz Manhood, Bebop Virtuosity, and a New Social Contract,”; and *The Amazing Bud Powell: Black Genius, Jazz History, and the Challenge of Bebop* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

⁷³Gabriel Solis, “Genius, Improvisation, and the Narratives of Jazz,” in *Musical Improvisation: Art, Education, and Society*, ed. Gabriel Solis and Bruno Nettl (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 97.

⁷⁴Solis, “Genius, Improvisation, and the Narratives of Jazz,” 97.

⁷⁵Solis, “Genius, Improvisation, and the Narratives of Jazz,” 99.

communities and contexts in ways that are crucial for understanding jazz outside of a singular homogenous canon, and further, reflects critiques of “genius” by Christine Battersby, Marcia Citron, and Vivian Luong and Taylor Myers, among others.⁷⁶ While such an approach is certainly empowering, particularly for jazz fans and musicians not well known and rarely featured, it fails to answer the question of what happens if a community is so embedded within a patriarchal vision of mastery that the scene is rendered inaccessible.

Brooks argues that for rock fans in similarly masculinist communities, it is up to the “sister fans—women of color as well as white”:

The challenge is to disturb these critical paradigms, to take a midnight train (with Gladys), as it were, through the thicket of guitar-god clichés that, for so long, privileged a focus on the slow hand axe man at the expense of tracing the wild and provocative history of modern pop as it emerged out of the interracial sounds of pioneering women entertainers.⁷⁷

In short, we need to attend to the ways in which power defined the jazz scene in every way. As Audre Lorde powerfully wrote, “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.”⁷⁸ Feather could not simultaneously maintain the gender ignorant standards of mastery that defined his connoisseurship *and* advocate for the women he knew were being discriminated against; attempting to do so resulted in his doubling down on the system, using the same systems, increasing the “scientific” approach, and embedding women more deeply within sexist commercial structures. *These* are the unspoken legacies to which we refer when we use the phrase “jazz master” today. Jazz patriarchy obscures its systems of power; jazz without patriarchy reveals them, acknowledging that true empowerment in jazz is not found through mediated decisions of artistry, but by engaging as critically with the mechanisms by which the music is produced and rewarded as we do with the music.

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⁷⁶Christine Battersby, *Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); Marcia J. Citron, *Gender and the Musical Canon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); and Vivian Luong and Taylor Myers, “Reframing Musical Genius: Toward a Queer, Intersectional Approach,” *Theory and Practice* 46 (2021): 83–96.

⁷⁷Brooks, *Liner Notes for the Revolution*, 59, 60.

⁷⁸Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (New York: Penguin Publishing Group, 2020), 102.

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