

All-Girl Bands: the Little-Known Legends of the Early Jazz World

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Jazz textbooks and biographies are nearly always dedicated solely to male jazz musicians and female jazz vocalists; female jazz musicians, especially those in big band orchestras, have been largely overlooked throughout history. Women in the jazz era faced not only social injustice with sexism and racism, but also faced many other obstacles and inconveniences in gaining respect and recognition for their work as musicians and entertainers. The names of highly talented female jazz musicians, the wide variety of instruments they played, and the lands in which they travelled are often forgotten. If not for the curiosity of a few historians, these female jazz musicians may have disappeared from history altogether.

Women's contribution to jazz music in the early 1900s is largely overlooked, as evidenced by the single, sparse page devoted to this history in *Jazz: The First 100 Years*. Women have had the opportunity to form bands since the late 1800s at least, but somehow they are frequently left out of the history books. Many talented female musicians existed in the jazz era and were even respected during their time. In spite of sexism and racism, women pursued a vocation in music in order to entertain the country. Increasingly historians are examining this important piece of the past, bringing numerous female musicians back to life. Female jazz musicians during the Swing Era, like Valaida Snow and the members of the International Sweethearts of Rhythm and Ada Leonard's All-American Girl Orchestra, were just as remarkable in their time as men such as Benny Goodman and Duke Ellington; yet, even though they were musically respected, they were often treated as inferior and rarely received equal recognition for their talent and accomplishments, especially today.

From the early stages of jazz, women were sidelined from performing as musicians. In the beginning of jazz's popularity, jazz musicians in general already worked hard for recognition. Both male and female musicians were sometimes thought of as lazy or cheap because of early associations of jazz with red light districts, on top of the fact that the musical style, which incorporated syncopation, was often censured, seen as a false musical form (Charles 184). Despite their talent and skills in instrumentation, "[w]omen who decided to pursue careers in jazz as anything other than vocalists were generally viewed as oddities" (Lewis 38). In fact, instruments like the trombone, trumpet, cornet, and saxophone were all considered masculine (184). A woman who wanted to maintain her "femininity" had few options: even as late as 1951, *Down Beat* magazine said, "Girls who want to be musicians should stick to instruments such as piano, violin, harp, or even accordion—any instrument that the playing of which doesn't detract

from their feminine appeal” (184). The societal rules for gender expression made it even more difficult for women who not only faced sexism, but also racism; African-American women were rarely given the opportunity to perform on the piano (184). However, ignoring these social constructs, some women boldly sought opportunities to perform jazz music.

Female musicians received their greatest opportunity for recognition during WWII, despite lingering prejudice. As men abandoned their jobs to serve the country, women took advantage of their absence to form bands in hopes that their careers would flourish (Bolden 7-9). These all-girl bands played for the troops, as well as on the home front in ballrooms, theaters, and clubs (14). Because they were often seen as “[a]n aberration in a male dominated jazz world,” audiences frequently expected female big bands to imitate the songs and styles made popular by male jazz musicians (“Valaida”; Bolden 4, 16). They were known to play standards of Count Basie, Erskine Hawkins, Glenn Miller, and Harry James (Tucker 68). However, these inevitable audience expectations frustrated them since they wanted to devote their own time to their own styles (Bolden 16). Female musicians most likely grew to resent the popular belief that “everybody wants to be a cat¹/because a cat’s the only cat who knows where it’s at” (Sherman). The ability to travel the country and display their talent was not enough to allow female jazz musicians the freedom of musicianship.

At this time, female African-American musicians had opportunity in the music industry, despite other layers of difficulty. A musical career was often highly appealing to a black woman, since her choices were usually either that of a domestic worker or a sharecropper (Tucker 55). Valaida Snow, a multi-talented African-American musician, became popular during the Harlem Renaissance, when African-Americans had more freedom to express themselves artistically (Charles 186). Snow’s 1922 appearance in Baron Wilkins’ Harlem Café allowed her recognition in a time where upper- and middle-class African-Americans were dancing the Charleston and the KKK was spreading hatred with supremacist dialogue and terrorism (186). The act of Snow joining other African-Americans in November 1924 to bring the segregated seating of New York theaters’ to the attention of the **National Association for the Advancement of Colored People** (NAACP) was not the only way African-Americans fought injustice; performing jazz was also a way of exercising their rights (187). Society in the U.S. treated minorities with so much injustice that many found hope in developing a reputable career by performing on European tours (187).

While Snow spent much time performing in Europe, many female bands chose to travel the U.S. despite the troubles that followed their ethnic diversity. The International Sweethearts of Rhythm, and other ethnically diverse bands, had to sidestep the Jim Crow Laws that disallowed African-Americans and whites from traveling together; the white members of the band would even paint their skin with dark makeup in order to avoid arrest (Martin and Waters 171). However, the “International” part of the Sweetheart’s title often gave them a perceived “exotic” label, which served to make them more acceptable to authorities in the South, appearing to be foreign and thus “above the law” (Tucker 163). These women were forced to play roles that are especially offensive today in order to follow their passion for music.

¹ Male jazz musicians were often referred to as “cats” in jazz slang (Bolden 16).

Besides social injustice, there were other obstacles that both white and African-American women faced in order to perform their music. Each musician in Ada Leonard's All-American Girl Orchestra, an all-white female band, made \$80 per week, with a minimum wage of 30 cents per hour (Bolden 13). They wore blouses and long skirts, although, according to Sherrie Tucker, they traded these for frilly, flouncy, sometimes strapless dresses when they played harder swing, because they wanted to look softer and emphasize their femininity (13, 18). Ada Leonard's band often had to use public restrooms as dressing rooms, and meals were "catch-as-catch-can" (18-19). On the other hand, the International Sweethearts of Rhythm each received only \$15 per gig, but travel was more convenient in their own semitrailer—the "Hi-Way Home"—which had beds, a kitchenette, a bathroom, and much more than other all-girl bands, traveling by train, were lacking (40). Female bands in general also had to put up with sexual harassment (23-24). Ada Leonard, a former stripper, was often sexualized despite her change in career, and every female band had to "deal with guys they didn't dig bugging them, heavy-hitting on them, trying to grope them, and worse" (13, 23-24). Many struggles surrounded the women's joy of playing jazz when they toured the country.

Nevertheless, female jazz bands were held in fairly high regard, aside from prejudicial setbacks. Ada Leonard's Orchestra was considered important enough to be listed in *Down Beat's* "Where the bands Are Playing" column, as well as mentioned multiple times in the *Beat* (Sherrie Tucker qtd. in Bolden 15, Bolden 15). Quite often these women were likened to musicians such as Louis Armstrong and given names like "Queen of the [instrument she played]" (Bolden 42, Braggs 35, Lewis 38). However, these women were also acutely aware of their own inferiority: in *Beat*, Leonard said "Girl Bands should not play too much jazz [...] People don't expect girls to play high-powered swing all night long. It looks out of place" (Bolden 15). Women knew the boundaries society put around them, yet often they revealed that they were unafraid to cross them.

Eventually female jazz musicians' careers began changing due to economic and artistic evolutions in the U.S. When men came back from WWII, women started losing their jobs to the returning soldiers. They were simply laid off, much like Jamie Sagar, a talented cornet player in Ada Leonard's Orchestra, who lost her job working in the CBS studio (Bolden 10, 56). When big bands lost popularity, many ex-big band females ended up in solos, duos, trios, etc. (59). Even though a great number of women made their way into the jazz music arena, Angela Davis, a professor of History of Consciousness at the University of California, Santa Cruz, believes that jazz is "still very much a masculine project" (Lewis 38). A substantial number of early all-girl jazz orchestras existed, but many of these accounts are forgotten due to a lack of oral history from these women (Bolden 59). Although a growing number of women and men are addressing this piece of history, "The history of women in jazz—as in many other art forms—is largely unknown, forgotten, or dismissed" (Lewis 38). However, history remembers some of these talented musicians:

Valaida Snow was one such woman who made a name for herself in both the U.S. and in Europe. Born in Chattanooga, Tennessee on June 2nd around 1900, the African-American musician spent her youth in the South—the "Land of Dixie" (Charles 183). Snow had an advantage when it

came to her musical education: her parents were both entertainers, and her mother was a music teacher who graduated from Howard University (185). Her whole family consisted of musicians; she had three sisters and one brother who all played professionally (“Valaida”). She was taught to play instruments by her mother—Snow learned the cello, bass, violin, guitar, banjo, mandolin, harp, accordion, clarinet, saxophone, and trumpet (“Valaida”, Charles 185). Having the skillfulness to play eleven instruments marks her as an exceptional musician, one who should be more widely recognized. She started performing at the age of four, gained experience in local clubs, and was a recognized professional singer and trumpeter by age 15 (Charles 183-184, “Valaida”). She and her three sisters performed together in New York, and she made her debut singing and dancing in Atlantic City and Philadelphia in the 1920s (184). Around the same time, she started playing the trumpet which was considered a socially unacceptable instrument for women at the time (184). Snow also traveled with African-American theatrical companies, performing across the U.S (185). Her first husband was Ananias Berry, a dancer from the Berry Brothers dancing troupe, and eventually she was remarried to Earle Edwards, a performer and producer (“Valaida”).

She had a notable, yet somewhat forgotten, career in performing arts. In 1926, Snow went to England and worked as an understudy to actress Florence Mills (Charles 185). In 1931, Snow co-starred in “Rhapsody in Black”; the review said, “Valaida Snow [is] effervescent with pop and vitality” (188). Her final tour was for “Blackbirds” in 1934. She later immigrated to Paris in 1936 and performed at the Apollo Theater in London. Snow even acted in two French films: “L’Alibi” in 1938 and “Pieges” in 1939. Snow recorded with famous jazz artists in Paris, Copenhagen, and Stockholm and toured and recorded with her own bands and other bands in the U.S., Europe, and the Far East (Charles 188, “Valaida”). In 1933, Snow performed in New York with Earl Hines, Count Basie, Teddy Weatherford, Willie Lewis, and Fletcher Henderson (“Valaida”). She also performed on Broadway as Mandy in *Chocolate Dandies* and performed in the Hollywood films *Take It from Me* and *Irresistible You* (“Valaida”).

Snow offered much to U.S. and European entertainment until she mysteriously disappeared for a few years during WWII. Mario A. Charles speculates about her life between 1940 and 1942: Snow was either incarcerated under the “Racial Infamy Law to Protect Blood” and taken to an internment camp; was deported to Germany for theft and drug possession, where she was held in the Wester-Faengle concentration camp; or was arrested in Switzerland or Sweden and taken back to the U.S (189). Having somehow vanished, at least from the public eye, she resurfaced in New York at the end of 1942, having grown quite sickly, and then she married Earle Edwards. At this time she worked with the Sunset Royal Orchestra, and in 1943, she travelled the U.S. and Canada, never returning to Europe. Her career was much quieter after the much-speculated time she spent in Europe during the war. On May 30, 1956, she died of a stroke, or cerebral hemorrhage, in the Kings County Hospital in New York, after three shows at the Palace Theater (Charles 189, “Valaida”).

Snow left a significant little-known legacy in jazz music. Her style was often compared to that of Louis Armstrong. She was labeled “The Queen of the Trumpet”, and Armstrong called her the second best trumpeter in the world (Lewis 38). Mary Lou Williams said, “She was hitting high C just like Louis Armstrong” (Braggs 35). She was nicknamed “Little Louis” and labeled the “most

well traveled female musician”, having toured in China, England, France, and Denmark (“Valaida”, Braggs 36). Earl Hines said of her energy, “She’d do a dancin’ number in seven pairs of shoes” (Braggs 35). In the 1930s, she was said to have a “contagious energy and spark”, and in the 1940s, she grew a deep blues feeling (“Valaida”). Two songs she is well-known for are “High Hat, Trumpet and Rhythm” and “Swing is the Thing” (Snow). While her swinging style and major accomplishments are considered fact, much of Snow’s personal life is based on conjecture, as she left behind little historical evidence of her experiences (Braggs 36). Nevertheless, Snow can be known for her passionate trumpet playing and incredible talent for performing.

Ada Leonard’s All-American Girl Orchestra was an all-white, all-girl band that lasted for fifteen years, mainly thriving in the Swing Era (Tucker 259). Ada Leonard transitioned from her history as a stripper to becoming bandleader. Needless to say, her reception into the already-formed and ambitious band was not quite a pleasant one (259, 262). In the end, Leonard was appreciated because her glamour would make it possible for the band to “hit it big”, although they spent many of their performances before the troops (264, 268). Janie Sagar, an early and lasting member of this band, studied the violin when she was young, but after braking her arm in a car accident, took up the cornet instead (Bolden 10). Fagel Liebam, who played the drums for Leonard’s band, gained her talent by listening to the radio and the phonograph (16-17).

Ada Leonard’s All-American Girl Orchestra played both “sweet” and “jump” jazz (Tucker 259). Despite that Leonard encouraged the band to play what she thought the public would want, they often ended up playing hard-swinging jazz (281). Reviewers all defined this Orchestra’s style as “jump.” The drummer, Dez Thompson, “stole the show with her rock-bound beat and flashy solos” (Bob Fossum qtd. in Tucker 281). Sherrie Tucker concludes that Leonard must have changed her mind about playing hard-swinging jazz—“it had evidently become acceptable as long as a glamorous visual image [Ada Leonard] was offered at the same time” (81). Two of their most famous songs were “One O’Clock” and “St. Louis Blues” (Bolden 15).

The International Sweethearts of Rhythm began in Piney Wood Country Life School, a boarding school meant for African-Americans, by founder Laurence Jones in 1937 (Bolden 38). The school gained funds by putting its students’ talents to good use through forming bands (Handy vii). Consuela Carter, an alumni of Piney Wood, “whipped the band into shape” (Bolden 38). This band was competitive from the start, and Jones hired skillful managers Eddie Durham, Jesse Stone, and Maurice King to lead the girls into the public eye (Handy viii). King, the musical director of the Sweethearts, cared more about talent than appearance, so race was never an issue (Bolden 52). Jones was also a great supporter; he was adamant that girls’ “emotions, rhythmic sense and musical tendencies found natural expression in swing music” (Jones qtd. in Handy 9). They made their debut in the Howard Theatre in 1940 (xi).

The International Sweethearts of Rhythm consisted of fourteen to seventeen young ladies from the ages of fourteen to nineteen (Handy 6). Many of these members were of mixed ethnicities, thus the “International” Sweethearts of Rhythm (9). Early Sweethearts were Nina de La Cruz, who was Indian; Nova Lee McGee, the “Hawaiian Sunshine Girl”; Alma Cortez, who was

Mexican; and Helen Saine, who enrolled in Piney woods without a musical background just so she could play with the Sweethearts (Bolden 38, Handy 125). The official members, before their split with Piney Wood, were pianist Johnnie Mae Rice; drummer Pauline Braddy; vocalist Evelyn McGee; saxophonists Irene Grisham, Ione Grisham, Helen Saine, and Willie Mae Wong; and trombonists Judy Bayron and Helen Jones (Handy 8). Edna Williams not only played the trumpet, but also sang, played the accordion, and was the Sweethearts' musical director (Bolden 41). Anna Mae Winburn joined the group as vocalist in 1942, offering much musical experience (Handy 167).

Through touring and performances, the members of the International Sweethearts of Rhythm sent thousands of dollars worth of funds back to support their school, until they split from the school in April 1941 in order to have authority over their careers (Bolden 43, Handy 6). The International Sweethearts of Rhythm came to be referred to as "the darlings of swing" (Handy 7). The Sweethearts were featured in photographs in the *Chicago Defender* almost every week by 1939 (125). They thrived as other big bands thrived—by playing competitively—and also faced the same struggles as other big bands, both male and female (68).

The Sweethearts played swing, both "hot" and "sweet" (Handy 125). Violet Burnside, a later member of the Sweethearts' saxophone section, was a soloist known for her participation in "Vi Vigor" (Martin and Waters 171-172). Burnside was said to play her tenor saxophone forcefully, and she had musical leadership abilities (Handy 191). Helen Saine learned the fundamentals of music and the saxophone and added "immensely to its [the band's] physical attractiveness" and "mildly to its artistry" (128). Edna Williams was called "Miss Satchmo" by the *Chicago Defender* when she was compared to Louis Armstrong (Bolden 41). Pauline Braddy, a drummer, was labeled "Queen of the Drums" (42). Some of their most famous songs were "Swing Shift" and "Tuxedo Junction" (50). The Sweethearts became part of the swing movement through their use of call-and-response, the drummer's hi-hat propulsion, and the use of other big band styles (Martin and Waters 139, International).

Snow and Leonard are models for other female jazz musicians who should not be forgotten for their contribution to jazz. Even before the Swing Era, early female jazz musicians, specifically in the late 1800s, made their way with music. Mattie Simpson, a cornetist, performed on the streets in Indianapolis in 1895, Nettie Gaff was a trombonist and member of The Mahara Minstrels, and Mrs. Laurie Johnson was a trumpeter who had a career that lasted thirty years (Charles 184-185). Dolly Jones Hutchinson was named the "foremother of jazz" and was a member of the "Disciples of Swing" (185). Marian Pankey's Chicago all-black female group helped encourage women to play wind instruments and perform jazz (Charles 185, Bolden 7). Babe Egan's Hollywood Redheads were an all-white female band (Bolden 7). In 1934, Ina Ray Hutton and Her Melodears was the first all-girl swing band to take off, and they appeared in feature films and movie shorts (Bolden 7). Hundreds of all-girl jazz bands existed throughout the developmental years of jazz, yet many are unknown to the average American.

Female jazz musicians, like Valaida Snow and the members of the International Sweethearts of Rhythm and Ada Leonard's All-American Girl Orchestra, were just as remarkable in their time as were the men who claim chapters in our textbooks and multiple biographies on our book

shelves; yet, even though these women were musically respected, they were often viewed as inferior and rarely receive equal recognition for their talent and accomplishments even today. It is surprising to discover that not just a few, but hundreds of all-girl jazz bands existed in the early 1900s and are all but forgotten. Many had incredible, notable talent in their musicianship and their artful performances; they were well-respected and admired by famous musicians and the audiences that praised them. Female jazz vocalists have always had their place in the limelight, and having been overshadowed by male musicians through social injustice, the Sweethearts, the Melodears, the Darlings, the Minstrels are only kept alive by the few historians who have been led by curiosity to seek out this part of entertainment history.

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