

BLACK WOMEN WORKING TOGETHER: JAZZ, GENDER, AND THE POLITICS OF VALIDATION

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In the essay “Black Women and Music: A Historical Legacy of Struggle” (2001), Angela Davis chronicles the cultural and historic trajectory black women musicians have advanced through music in their transition from free people to enslaved persons to free but oppressed people in relation to the context of their lives in Africa and America. While Davis situates her discussion in how black women have used spirituals and the blues as a means of developing social and political consciousness, her theoretical scope could easily be enlarged to include other forms of black music, most notably jazz. One of the arguments Davis raises concerns the common reading of black women’s relationships with each other in the larger scope of popular culture. These relationships are often framed as competitive and antagonistic. Rarely has the complex and layered engagement between black women been acknowledged. In recent years, popular culture has perpetuated the trope of competitiveness, hostility, and violence between black women through social networks (e.g., Facebook, Twitter) and reality television (e.g., “Basketball Wives,” “Real Housewives of Atlanta”). These depictions have been used to stereotype black women, discredit their viability in certain social environments, and reject them as intellectual beings. But close examination of the social and familial relationships between women exposes a complex culture of engagement and socialization. These rela-

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tionships are at times defined by layered and multifarious praxes through which collectives of black women have engaged in self-definition; created systems of knowledge that provided the skills to navigate political, social, and economic spheres; and formed “safe spaces” that have supported their process of brokering power.

Why has this competitive narrative permeated popular culture and our readings of how black women engage with one another? One reason is that this narrative has been defined by emotional responses generated from the engagement between black men and women in public and private spheres. The supposed lack of “good” black men who can sustain “good” relationships with “good” black women serves as the undercurrent for competitive and sometimes toxic relationships between black women. This is furthered with the proliferation of the mythology of the “strong black woman” and her engagement with “weak black men” and the supposed subversion of social and power structures that define masculinity. These ideological beliefs raise a number of questions when considered in relation to the interactions between black women and men in larger contexts of popular culture. How has the competitive narrative framed how black women musicians are read and defined within popular culture history and criticism? To understand this we must interrogate how the narrative of competition and the engagement of black women musicians have been documented in the historiography of jazz.

The narrative of the competitive personality or the inability to “get along” among black women musicians has become paramount to the mythologies that have shaped the public understandings of the culture of jazz.¹ It is often used as one of the rationales for why women are “disruptive” to the work being done in spaces where jazz is created. The prevailing thought is that the competitiveness that women exhibit in these spaces is one that is destructive rather than productive to the working environment. The male competitive spirit in jazz, however, is the essence of the creative energy generated. It is “the” necessary constant, for it produces cultural hallmarks, real-time moments of genius and frames the infinite nature of possibility that occurs when men *work together* even when poised or posed in competitive stances. When this type of analysis is extended to women musicians, it is often subverted from its role as the tool of empowerment that helps one develop her individual musical voice to one where she is forced into

1. There are several examples of jazz critics “pitting” female jazz musicians against each other. An example of this is the criticism written around Mary Lou Williams and Hazel Scott, who were often compared to each other, with the latter dismissed as not being a “real” jazz musician. In reality Scott and Williams were close personal friends and never viewed each other as professional competitors. For more information, see Kernodle (2004).

battle to be the “one” female creative voice that survives and earns a place in the historical narrative. The result, as evidenced in the written, recorded, and cinematic histories of jazz, is what several scholars have described as the phenomenon of the “exceptional woman” (Tucker 2001/2002, Rustin 2005). The exceptional woman becomes the rationale for the exclusion of other women and lends support to a narrative of invisibility that occurs in jazz histories as it relates to women musicians. Sherrie Tucker describes this as follows:

Women are invisible because they weren't good enough. Playing good enough meant playing like men. Women who play like men are “exceptional women,” and exceptional women can enter the discourse without changing it. We can acknowledge the importance of an exceptional woman in jazz history while retaining the belief that women cannot play powerfully enough or women can't improvise. We can use her inclusion to argue that our historical vision of jazz is not sexist, but merit-based. (2001/2002, 384)

Most important to this discussion is how this narrative of the exceptional woman has defined common understandings of how these women *worked* and created art. Much of jazz scholarship and criticism has equally contributed to the widespread notion that exceptional women work in a space of “gendered isolation,” and collaboration occurs only with male peers or husbands. Examples of this would include the working relationships of Lil and Louis Armstrong, Lovie Austin and her Jazz Hounds, Mary Lou Williams and the Andy Kirk band, John and Alice Coltrane, and Bertha and Elmo Hope. One is left to believe that exceptional women work primarily in isolation from each other because while the stage can accommodate as many exceptional men as possible, there is space for only one exceptional woman. These notions became increasingly important in the years following World War II due the expanding subtext of masculinity and race that permeated jazz culture. Only in the reclamation histories of the 1980s and 1990s have such beliefs been refuted. This work seeks to expand the analytical lens of jazz histories to consider what happens when two or more exceptional women *work together*.²

The potential of this type of analytical and methodological approach raises a number of questions. How does the narrative accommodate professional and personal relationships between exceptional women who have similar life and career trajectories? What does the collaborative praxis engaged in by these musicians reveal about the systems of knowledge build-

2. Much of the scholarship of Sherrie Tucker, especially in relationship to all-girl bands and female jazz musicians on the West Coast, has documented these issues. See Tucker (2000); and Tucker (1996).

ing that black women engaged in apart from their male peers? How did these women create support systems and networks that enabled them to subvert social power structures and create “spaces” for themselves within male-defined environments? This essay seeks to answer these questions through an analysis of the professional collaborations and personal relationships trombonist/arranger Melba Liston developed with peer black women musicians, most notably Mary Lou Williams. Liston and Williams first collaborated during the 1957 Newport Jazz Festival in a performance that marked Williams’s return from a self-imposed three-year hiatus from public performing, and offers one of the first documented instances in which these two “exceptional women” performed on stage together. In preparation for the performance, Liston, a trombonist and arranger for Dizzy Gillespie’s orchestra, arranged segments of Williams’s 1945 symphonic composition *The Zodiac Suite* into the first big band setting of the work. This would come to signify the essence of Liston and Williams’s musical collaborations—Liston’s reworking of material drawn from the pianist/arranger’s vast oeuvre that created new “readings” of Williams’s musical contributions to jazz.

Over the next six years (1957–64), Liston and Williams worked on a number of projects that revealed a progressive vision of jazz, as evidenced in their compositional efforts and their marketing of jazz through the inaugural Pittsburgh Jazz Festival in 1964. Although these collaborations are documented through recordings and newspaper and personal accounts, there are several interpretative challenges that emerge when trying to chronicle or historicize the collaborative process used by the two. Neither left any written documentation that specifically outlines the praxis they engaged in while writing certain arrangements.³ Nor did either speak specifically in personal interviews of who initiated what. So it is not always clear who did what and when. This lack of written documentation may be indicative of a focus on verbal dialogue versus written correspondence. Considering the expansive holdings associated with the Mary Lou Williams Collection at the Institute of Jazz Studies at Rutgers University in Newark and the Melba Liston Collection at the Center for Black Music Research at Columbia College Chicago and the obvious absence of written correspondence contained within, one can surmise that their physical proximity to each other (they both resided in Harlem during this time) framed their collaborative process.⁴

3. The extant correspondence between the two is from the 1970s and consists mainly of holiday cards.

4. Randy Weston discusses in *African Rhythms: The autobiography of Randy Weston* (2010) how Williams home had become the hangout for musicians and that Liston lived close to her.

Emblematic of this is Liston's selection and reworking of specific musical material that Williams used for particular events (e.g., recording dates and live performances) and the pianist's acknowledgement of Liston's importance and assistance. Although the focus of this essay is the collaborative and personal relationships that developed between Liston and her female peers, in order to understand these relationships, one must also consider her relationships with male peers such as Dizzy Gillespie. Historicizing the relationship between Liston and Williams requires an interrogation of the triangular relationship that developed between the two women and Gillespie and how it refutes the commonly held notion that black women are incapable of forming emotional/professional relationships due to their chronically competitive personalities, especially when black men are also engaged in these scenarios (Davis 2001, 230). This work also seeks to explore how Liston and other black women collaborators sought to redefine the knowledge base associated with jazz, reposition the importance of the solo as the badge of legitimacy, and subvert the power structure of the bandstand through the intricate and innovative nature of their arrangements.

I Am Who I Say I Am: Self-Definition and Survival

First you are a jazz musician, then you are black, then you are female. I mean it goes down the line like that. We're like the bottom of the heap.⁵

—Melba Liston (Stokes 1983)

In the landmark book *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*, feminist theorist Patricia Hill Collins explores the methods through which black women, as a subordinate group, engage in the acquisition of the knowledge deemed necessary to integrate into the power structures and social spaces that exclude them. She also discusses how black women engage in redefining themselves in contexts that extend beyond common readings of black femininity. The investigation of such processes is necessary in understanding the homosocial networks that black women musicians created to counter the growing resistance to their presence on the bandstand during the mid-twentieth century. The culture of jazz is one that is defined in the development of homosocial networks that enable the individual musician to gain knowledge, develop a certain skill set, and refine his/her individual musical voice. In the early 1940s, these practices extended beyond the bandstand to the after-hour jam sessions. While these

5. Liston as quoted in Stokes (1983, 100).

sessions provided musicians with opportunities to interact socially, they often became spaces that benefitted male musicians only. Dizzy Gillespie describes the environment of the jam session as follows:

Amongst musicians when I came up, we had a very close feeling of camaraderie.

We were all trumpet players together—Charlie Shavers, Benny Harris, Bobby Moore, and I—and we were unified socially; not just trumpet players, other musicians too.

We traded off ideas not only on the bandstand, but also in the jam sessions. We had to be as sensitive to each other as brothers in order to express ourselves completely, maintain our individuality, yet play as one. Jam sessions, such as those wonderfully exciting ones held at Minton's Playhouse were seedbeds for our new, modern style of music. (Gillespie and Shipton 1979, 134)

Gillespie's account of the jam session's critical role in the development of bebop and other modern jazz styles is centered on its importance to the development of the male musician. Although he does not suggest that women were not welcome, it is clear that the jam session was a masculine space that men inhabited for character building, self-actualization, and knowledge acquisition. Trumpeter Clora Bryant, who participated in many of the jam sessions associated with Central Avenue in Los Angeles, substantiates the notion of the jam session as a masculine space. "A woman would rarely venture into a club unaccompanied . . . Women instrumentalists, no matter how well known, steered clear of the jam sessions. Women who did venture into the performing arena found the range of opportunities limited" (Dje Dje and Meadows 1998, 285).

With the jam session becoming the center of knowledge acquisition and character building during the postwar years, it became increasingly important for black women musicians to find alternative methods of knowledge building. Most continued in a practice black women have engaged in for centuries—the development of grassroots networks that enable the transference of knowledge. The act of "knowing" for female jazz musicians became increasingly essential for the development of personal consciousness and the necessary skill set to traverse male spaces like the jam session and bandstand.⁶ While the act of "knowing" (especially in relation to prevailing performance aesthetic) accomplished this goal, it did not ensure their emotional survival. For this, one had to develop wisdom. Wisdom occurs when knowledge intersects with experience. Experience, not abstract concepts, became the important factor in black women developing the wisdom that is key to their survival. Collins explains: "As members of a subordinate group,

6. In relation to jazz, Sherrie Tucker discusses this in "West Coast Women—A Jazz Genealogy" (1996).

black women cannot afford to be fools of any type, for our objectification as the Other denies us the protection that white skin, maleness and wealth confer. This distinction between knowledge and wisdom and the use of experience as the cutting edge dividing them, has been key to black women's survival" (2000, 257). When this theoretical lens is applied to the activities of black women musicians that were active in the years following World War II, it reveals how these women promoted among themselves a type of social knowledge that provided solutions to the issues that developed out of the engagement of the black female body and male-defined spaces. The professional trajectory of Liston uncovers how the homosocial networks created by black women musicians stimulated knowledge acquisition and the development of wisdom. These networks centered largely on the trinity of church, home, and community.

The black church, since its beginnings in slavery, has historically provided a space for public music making among black women. It also served as a means through which black women brokered for power within male-centered social/power structures. Outside of women's ministries, such as missionary societies and kitchen ministries, the role of church musician, choir director, or song leader provided black women with limited possibilities of leadership in the black community. Music also allowed women to subvert prevalent power structures of the church (men held decision-making positions despite being the minority) and frame the theological perspective and common practice within specific denominations. Evidence of this can be found in the roles Lucie Campbell and Mattie Moss Clark played in elevating and defining gospel performance practice in the Baptist and Church of God in Christ (COGIC) denominations during the twentieth century (Boyer 1992; George 1992; Walker 1992; Kernodle 2006). Liston spoke often of the importance the black church had in framing her earliest contexts of music making and in the development of the consciousness of her female relatives. She weekly attended church with her family, regularly engaging in congregational singing. While Liston never sang in any of the choirs of the church or played her trombone during the services, her reflections indicate that she viewed these experiences as being key to her understanding of how important music was in defining the black experience.⁷

The home also served as an important site for knowledge development for Liston. The piano, radio, and records served as conduits of knowledge building as they exposed the young musician to performances that featured some of jazz's most influential musicians of the time (Liston 1996,

7. Liston and Mary Lou Williams discuss the influence of the church in the development of their respective musical voices in a number of places, but most notable are both of their oral history interviews with the Smithsonian Jazz Masters. However, Williams talks more about the impact of music on the life of black migrants. See Kernodle (2004).

Dahl 1984). Liston acquired a historical and performative knowledge of jazz through these media, which translated into her developing a method through which she learned to replicate the music she heard on her instrument (Dahl 1984, 253). One of Liston's earliest memories of performing in the home was playing "Deep River" and "Rocking the Cradle of the Deep" while sitting on the back porch with her grandfather (Liston 1996, 4). The development of Liston's musical voice was furthered by her family's migration to Los Angeles in 1937 and the larger black community's acknowledgment of her extraordinary talent. She participated in a highly developed and active music scene that consisted not only of the nightlife associated with Central Avenue but also a strong public school music program.

In addition to playing in school bands, Liston also participated in Alma Hightower's WPA children's band. Although she was a drummer, Hightower's legacy in jazz history has been defined more so through her role as teacher and mentor. Alma Hightower and her Melodic Dots proved to be an important training ground for both female and male musicians. The band during Liston's tenure included pianist Alice Young and saxophonists Vi Redd and Dexter Gordon. According to Liston, the young musicians received a full range of training that included tap and hula dancing, singing lessons, theory, and basic musicianship (Liston 1996, 7). Youth, a lack of knowledge regarding the racial and gender politics of the cultural industry, and the mentorship by Hightower shielded Liston from many of the issues that derailed many female musicians. By the time she joined professional union bands at age sixteen, Liston had begun the process of developing a strong performance personality.

Liston's knowledge base grew even more when she joined the all-male bands of Gerald Wilson and Count Basie. Through her stints with these bands, Liston gained more advanced musical skill but also an awareness of how the female body can disrupt and challenge the social structures and spaces that defined the culture of jazz—tour buses, jam sessions, and bandstands. Like many of her peers, Liston learned that life on the road as the only woman encouraged the development of various types of "knowing" that was based in how you engaged with men in those spaces. These forms of knowledge reveal 1) the vulnerability of the black female body; 2) the devaluation of the black female body within certain cultural/social spheres; 3) how the presence of the female body in male-centered spaces could be read as promoting a type of sexual currency that disrupted the power/social relationships among men. Liston's experiences with physical and sexual violence at the hands of band members will be discussed more thoroughly in the Tucker/O'Connell essay contained in this issue. As a female body and trombonist, Liston's presence on the bandstand was often read as "taking" or robbing black men of professional opportunities. Such readings reflect how black males were valued more in the cultural

industry that promoted jazz during the postwar years and how jazz narratives sexualized the presence of women's bodies in certain spaces.

Liston's most quoted account of being viewed as the "other" or outside the camaraderie of men pertained to the time she was asked to join Dizzy Gillespie's band in 1956. Commonly referred to as Gillespie's State Department band, this group was one of the first jazz aggregations to tour Europe, the Middle East, and South America as part of the Eisenhower administration's strategy to use global mass mediation of American music to combat the spread of communism. Gillespie was already engaged in Norman Granz's famous Jazz at the Philharmonic tour when the official announcement was made, so he left the assembly of the band to Quincy Jones. Jones had two distinct mandates from Gillespie. The first was to ensure that the group was to include both men and women and be racially diverse. The second was to strategize a plan that reconciled the issues of racial inequality with the strong propaganda element of the tour without seeming complacent to the failure of the government. To address the first, Jones added white musicians Phil Woods (alto sax), Rodd Levitt (trombone), singer Dotty Sautler, and Liston. But, in relation to the second issue, Gillespie decided to create a program that surveyed the history of jazz through accompanying lectures by Marshall Stearns. While there seemed to be little resistance to the addition of white musicians or Sautler, the decision to hire Liston versus a male trombonist was met with profane negativism. She recounts her invitation to join the band as follows:

Dizzy was in Europe. Quincy Jones was the musical director and was organizing the band for Dizzy. Dizzy said, "Get the band together, but include Melba, and Melba is to write some of the music." So those were orders no questioning that. But when I got to New York I heard some comments, about, "Why the hell did he send all the way to California for a bitch trombone player?" They didn't know me at all, but as Dizzy instructed, I arranged some things and brought them with me, "Stella by Starlight" and "Anitra's Dance." . . . When we got into the initial rehearsals and they started playing my arrangements, well, that erased all the little bullshit, you see. They say, "Mama's all right." Then I was "Mama," I wasn't bitch no more. (Gillespie and Shipton 1979, 416)

In later years Liston would explain this reaction as being fueled by the fact that members of the band had friends who wanted the job (Liston 1996, 16). But, further reading might reveal other reasons. In the previous section of this essay I discussed how the jam session and the bandstand had increasingly become male-centered spaces in the years following World War II. Musicians, critics, and fans created a spectrum of readings that defined the woman's role in this culture. The use of the term "woman" was a reference to females who inhabited this space as wives, girlfriends, patrons, or groupies. All of these roles positioned women as being diametrically "outside" of the culture, on

the periphery, but comprising central networks that supported the creative activities of men. Most importantly, these “women” did not disrupt the *work* or camaraderie of the men, but enabled it. They were essentially participating in a manner that maintained their status as “women” or as female bodies who acknowledged and exercised in appropriately gendered spaces. The counter to the “woman” was the “bitch.” In this case “bitch” became the reading of the female body that disrupted male-defined spaces. The bitch did not support the creative efforts of the male artist; she took away from his art by taking his place on the bandstand and devaluing what he does. The bitch also creates conflicts between him and other men by challenging the power structure of jazz in an attempt to manage the business affairs or correct perceived injustices against her lover or husband. The lack of any real historicizing of jazz wives has allowed for the proliferation of negative readings of their engagement with public jazz culture. Readings of Bud Powell’s wife, Buttercup, is a good example of this.⁸

The juxtaposition between the “woman” and the “bitch” and the male jazz musician is further complicated when race is considered. Although there are a number of white women instrumentalists who were associated with the postwar scene (e.g., Marian McPartland), the white woman’s place in modern jazz history has largely been defined as groupie, lover, patron, and wife. In the book *To Be or Not to Bop*, Gillespie explains the juxtaposition between white and black women and jazz musicians:

There’s not too much difference between black and white women, but you’ll find that to gain a point, a white woman will do almost anything to help if it’s something that she likes. There’s almost nothing, if a white woman sees it’s to her advantage that she won’t do because she’s been taught that the world is hers to do with, as she wants. This shocks the average black musician who realizes that black women wouldn’t generally accept giving so much without receiving something definite in return. A black woman might say; “I’ll love him . . . but not my money.” But a white woman will give anything, even her money, to show her own strength. She’ll be there on the job, every night, sitting there supporting her own goodies. She’ll do it for kicks, whatever is her kick. . . . As a patron of arts in this society, the white woman’s role, since white males have been so preoccupied with making money, brought her into close contact with modern jazz musicians and created relationships that were often very helpful to the growth of our art. (Gillespie and Shipton 1979, 282)

Gillespie’s assertions not only substantiate a prevailing reading of the role of women in jazz spaces, but they also reveal that race complicated these issues. Liston (and many of her peers) had not only to challenge so-

8. Robin D. G. Kelley has addressed such misreadings of jazz wives. See his obituary of Nellie Monk (2002).

cial constructs that marginalized them as women but also to negotiate the racial issues that defined them. Revisiting the earlier quotation regarding the reaction to Gillespie's decision to hire Liston for his State Department band exposes how she, like many of her peers, had to move beyond the point of "knowing" what their presence represented to these spaces to developing and enacting the wisdom to survive these potentially hostile situations. Rather than suppress her femininity, apologize for her presence, or try to prove her musical prowess as a soloist, Liston allowed her skills as an arranger to argue her position. From extant accounts, Liston never responded to questions about why Gillespie sent her to California for a "bitch"; she follows the instructions of the bandleader, which are to distribute the arrangements he asked her to prepare. Thus Gillespie and Liston make the jazz arrangement, not the solo, the equalizer. In so doing, they allowed Liston to reflect a knowledge base that exceeded the skill set of the musicians and qualified her presence. Moreover, as the conduit for the artistic expression of her male peers, Liston's arrangements provided a means for developing, rather than stifling, the creative symmetry of the band.

The jazz arrangement provided the means through which Liston also transitioned from "bitch" to "mama," indicating another level to the spectrum of reading female bodies in jazz. While the term "mama" is often used to acknowledge the strength, power, and nurturance of black women, in this case the use of "mama" is duplicitous. It is an acknowledgement of Liston's strength as musician, yet it is also reflective of her willingness to take on certain domestic needs of the band. In an interview with Linda Dahl in 1982, Liston explained that her willingness to sew buttons, cut hair, and attend to the domestic, nonsexual needs of the band members meant that she was being a "woman" or operating in a gendered role that precipitated camaraderie with her male peers (Dahl 1984, 256). But her refusal to engage in sexual relationships with band mates also led to the marginalization of her sexuality. Thus the use of the term "Mama" takes on a new meaning, which extends out of the readings of black women's sexuality that formed the binary of the asexual Mammy and the oversexed Jezebel. "Mama" becomes the modern representation of the nurturing, asexual black woman, whose presence in certain social spaces is framed by her service to the men around her. Although Liston accepted being identified as "mama" because of the gender politics of the time, in later years she was insistent that female musicians define themselves and not be marginalized through such characterizations:

The male-female thing is really something else. And that has not changed too much. You don't see it quite so clearly, and you don't hear it quite so clearly, but nothin' changed. Like, well, they're doin' it to Janice Robinson. I worry about Janice, who is a most talented girl. And she is not accepted just for that

by the musicians. And they don't even know it. It's not what they intend to do—the brothers would not hurt for nothin'. But this attitude is just a deeply imbedded thing. It's just a *habit* . . . They used to call her "Little Melba." I told them that's wrong . . . all the cats was standin' there, and they said, "Hey little mama!" I said, "She ain't no little mama." I said, "That's *Janice Robinson*. Hopefully, she's not goin' to follow in *my* footsteps and let you do the same thing to her that you did to me. And you just quit it." (Dahl 1984, 258)

Liston's assertions reflected her growing knowledge of the importance of self-definition for black women musicians in light of the ever-shifting cultural contexts that defined the jazz scene of the late-twentieth century. For Liston as well as many of her peers, it became increasingly important for black women not to allow their identities to be completely defined by their work environments or engagement with various power structures. Instead they should engage in defining themselves through their own social and/or professional networks. These circles facilitated the development of a social knowledge base that would frame how they engaged not only with one another but also in the male-centered spaces they inhabited. Liston's acquisition of such knowledge and engagement with this social/professional network began first during her early years with Hightower and extended to her experiences touring with Billie Holiday in the summer of 1950.

The interactions between Holiday and Liston, during a short-lived tour of the South in 1950, reveal how the relationships between black women sometimes developed into a type of mother-daughter dynamic. The relationship of mother to daughter frames one of the most immediate and intimate ways in which knowledge is transferred among black women. This type of bond developed between Holiday and Liston largely out of a need to ensure that the singer remained sober and drug-free during this tour. Shortly after Holiday's manager John Levy hired Gerald Wilson's band to accompany the singer, he asked Liston to "keep an eye on [Holiday]" (Blackburn 2005, 245). Holiday's struggles with her addiction were significant during this period, and Levy thought that the tour would be a good way to keep her clean. At twenty-three years of age, Liston had acquired a great deal of professional experience but had had little experience with what she called "night-life people" (Blackburn 2005, 245). Part of her assignment was to share a room with Holiday, and it was during those moments that the singer began to impart strategies about surviving the demands that society placed on black women. "She talked about her childhood and the chaotic life she had lived in Baltimore, maybe with certain memories reawakened by the recent visit there," recalled Liston. Although she claims to not have understood half of what Holiday said, Liston developed a close relationship with the singer. "I thought she was really great. I loved her. Lady was an easy person to like because she was a very warm person, you couldn't help it. If she liked

you, she liked contact. I'd see her and she'd always hug me" (Blackburn 2005, 245). Billie took to calling Liston her "little girl," inferring a type of mother-daughter relationship. Through this relationship Holiday warned Liston about "getting messed up in life." Liston would assert in later years that looking back on this time she realized how she became the daughter Holiday never had, but longed for (Blackburn 2005, 245). But, most importantly, Holiday, like many black mothers, understood that if Liston accepted the sexual politics and role of "mammy" that would be offered to her by the social constructs of the cultural industry, she would become a willing participant in her subordination. Acting in the role of mother to Liston meant Holiday provided the necessary knowledge that would ensure her physical and mental survival in hostile spaces (Collins 2000, 183). Despite a disastrous end to the tour, Liston and Holiday remained close throughout the years, and the mother-daughter dynamic never ceased.⁹ Liston, while touring with her all-female quintet in 1958, saw Holiday for the last time in an airport. Although the singer was struggling with health issues, Liston recalls that she "was looking beautiful and she was dressed real nice . . . Billie gazed at this little group of female musicians and then addressed the agent in a voice filled with maternal authority. 'Now you take care of my children!'" (Blackburn 2005, 248). Holiday died a year later, but the knowledge she imparted to Liston framed how the trombonist engaged with other women musicians during the remainder of her career.

Melba, Mary Lou and Dizzy

The bebop era, socially speaking, was a major concrete effort of progressive thinking black males and females to tear down and abolish the ignorance and racial barriers that were stifling to the growth of any true culture in modern America.

—Dizzy Gillespie (Gillespie and Shipton 1979, 282)

In order to understand the circuitous factors that brought Melba Liston and Mary Lou Williams together in the summer of 1957, one would have to look at the relationship that developed between each of these musicians and Dizzy Gillespie. The triangular relationship that developed between these three reveals how varied and layered the relationship between black male and female musicians were. Where most triangular relationships are

9. There were a number of missteps that placed the tour in a financial bind. Holiday refused to continue, and the musicians were left stranded in South Carolina. Wilson and Liston eventually made their way back to Los Angeles, but the experience proved to be too much for Liston. Soon afterwards she took a hiatus from playing and found a clerical job with the Board of Education.

generally based on competition that is rooted in sexual attraction, this one was based on 1) support systems that ensured the personal survival of jazz musicians; 2) a progressive view of jazz and the desire to expand the music beyond the commercialized trends orchestrated by the culture industry; and 3) a collective desire to redefine the persona of the black jazz musician from the common reading of the “other” to that of artist.

Williams met Gillespie in the early 1940s following her departure from the Kirk band and her subsequent move to New York with a small band she led that included drummer Art Blakey. Liston first encountered Gillespie while working with Gerald Wilson’s band during the late 1940s. Both Williams and Liston credit Gillespie with being key to their survival during the 1940s and 1950s. “During that period, I was living at the Dewey Square Hotel, and that was the beginning of what they later called ‘bop’,” Williams recalled in Gillespie’s memoir *To Be or Not to Bop*. “I used to go around the corner to Minton’s and I met Dizzy there. He knew that I was in New York and wasn’t working, and he began to give me some of his gigs. And most of them were non-union gigs” (Gillespie and Shipton 1979, 148). Williams’s successful performance during some of these gigs led to her being able to join the union before the traditional three- to six-month window and transition fully into the New York scene. “He always looked out for me, and I never realized how wonderful he was until years later. Anytime he thought I wasn’t working or something wasn’t happening right, he’d always come to my rescue” (Gillespie and Shipton 1979, 149). Liston’s experience with Gillespie was similar and led to her playing in his band:

I had come back East with Gerald Wilson’s band, and the band disbanded. Somehow or another, I wound up in New York. Dizzy had the big band at what I think was Bop City, and he heard that I was in town, and there was one trombone player that he wanted to get rid of, so he immediately fired him. And I went by to visit. He says, “Where ya goddamned horn? Don’t you see this empty chair up there? You’re suppose to be working tonight.” (Gillespie and Shipton 1979, 356)

Liston ended up working with the band, which included John Coltrane, Jimmy Heath, and John Lewis, for four to five months before the group disbanded.

In both scenarios, Gillespie, who was quickly growing as one of the leading voices in modern jazz, gave access to the bandstand to two extraordinary black women. By the time both encountered Gillespie, they each had earned a reputation for not only being strong soloists but also innovative arrangers. Both had escaped the narrative of invisibility, not through their instrumental performances, but through their arranging skills, which allowed them to legitimize the eclectic and diverse knowledge systems from which they had drawn as black women. It was also through the jazz arrangement that

Gillespie provided each woman the means to subvert the power structure of the bandstand. In 1949 Williams wrote the bop fairytale “In the Land of Oo Bla Dee” for Gillespie’s band, and the tune became a staple in his repertory throughout the 1940s and 1950s. But the most striking example of Gillespie’s acknowledgement of and challenge to the subordination of female musicians is seen in his selection of Liston for the State Department band. Let’s revisit the earlier quoted antidote:

Dizzy was in Europe. Quincy Jones was the musical director and was organizing the band for Dizzy. Dizzy said, “*Get the band together, but include Melba, and Melba is to write some of the music.*” So those were orders no questioning that [emphasis added]. But when I got to New York I heard some comments, about, “Why the hell did he send all the way to California for a bitch trombone player?” They didn’t know me at all, but as Dizzy instructed, I arranged some things and brought them with me, “Stella by Starlight” and “Anitra’s Dance.” . . . When we got into the initial rehearsals and they started playing my arrangements, well, that erased all the little bullshit, you see. They say, “Mama’s all right.” Then I was “Mama,” I wasn’t bitch no more. (Gillespie and Shipton 1979, 416)

Note how Gillespie prepared Liston for the reaction to her presence. He did not instruct Jones to have her prepare her best tune in order to prove her prowess as a soloist, instead he has her *write some tunes*. Gillespie was fully aware that Liston was a capable instrumentalist and soloist and that that would not be enough to quell the simmering tensions. He understood that her innovative musical voice as an arranger would be the factor that would legitimize her presence. The arrangements she chooses are significant—the jazz standard “Stella by Starlight” (this would have been known by most of the musicians in the band) and a reworking of Edvard Greig’s composition “Anitra’s Dance,” from *Peer Gynt Suite no. 1*, which she renamed “Annie’s Dance.” The latter was an important statement about the breadth of Liston’s musical knowledge and her ability to reconceive any musical idea or motive as a jazz theme. The reaction was exactly what Gillespie had surmised. According to Liston, when he heard the negative comments, Gillespie said, “Go on and take one of those arrangements out and see if they can play it. Two or three bars later, he said ‘Now who’s the [bitch]?’” (Dahl 1984; Liston 1996).¹⁰ The advanced musicianship that Liston’s arrangements required challenged the musicians and their initial dismissal of her as the “bitch” who took an opportunity from another man.

Liston’s arrangements became an important part of the identity of Gillespie’s 1956 State Department band as “Annie’s Dance” and a reworking of Debussy’s “Reverie” became signature pieces of the band. The latter—

10. Liston discusses further how Wilson and Gillespie championed her skills to other musicians and how this shaped how other musicians viewed her in the NEA oral history interview (1996, 16).

another work that pointed to the trombonist's love for the lush harmonies and emotional nuances of nineteenth-century Romantic composers like Debussy and Ravel—served as a showcase for Liston, who played an extensive solo during live and recorded performances. "Annie's Dance" was used to "break the ice" with audiences. Their knowledge of the theme, which Liston used as the main motivic material, made the music played by the band more accessible with international audiences (Liston 1996, 36).

Gillespie's benevolent attitude toward other musicians eventually led to Liston and Williams meeting in 1957. In the years preceding this meeting, Williams had positioned herself as one of the purveyors of modern jazz through her arrangements and recorded performances and had been one of the few jazz pioneers to champion bebop. She had also experimented with new forms of jazz composition, which had resulted in the performance of her set of symphonic poems called the *Zodiac Suite* at Town Hall in 1946. In 1952 she went to Europe for what was supposed to be just a series of performances in England and ended up traversing the continent for two years before settling in France and suffering from physical and mental exhaustion. When she returned to the States in 1954, she renounced public performance, converted to Catholicism, and began working with drug-addicted jazz musicians. Gillespie and his wife, Lorraine, were the pianist's primary link to the jazz world, and each urged Williams to return to her music. When she refused, Gillespie began sending Liston to check on the mental and physical health of the pianist. There is no indication that Liston and Williams had met each other before 1957, but it is quite likely that they knew of each other because of their individual relationships with Gillespie and close proximity of living in Harlem. It is also not clear if Liston, who took on many different musical and nonmusical roles in the Gillespie band, protested or tried to avoid these visits. Williams's accounts of these visits indicate that the two connected in a personal way, and, in time, Liston inspired her to begin playing piano again and composing new works. Williams would describe these first interactions as follows:

Dizzy would send Melba. "Go up there and see what Lou's doing. See how she's playing." Melba, I understand, would go back and say, "Man, Lou played some chords and you ought to hear them. They're really great." He said, "well, get her out." Melba would come here and when he took me out to the Newport Jazz Festival, Melba arranged some things. He said, "Those arrangements were really good." She said, "I didn't do them. That was Lou's arrangement and I just sat down and took the music down." He said, "What! Get her out here!" (Williams 1973, 149)

Williams's account indicates that one approach to the collaborative process between her and Liston during these early interactions consists of

the trombonist writing down the musical ideas played by Williams. This points to a similar mode of working that developed between Liston and Randy Weston. Although Lisa Barg's essay will contextualize the working relationship between Liston and Weston, it bears noting that in that collaborative scenario, Liston generally wrote down initial ideas and then began working them into intricate arrangements. This might have also defined how Williams and Liston worked together, but beyond the citation above, there is no evidence to substantiate this further. Although there is a lack of definitive evidence regarding the collaborative process used, what results in the subsequent years reveals how Liston and Williams worked to expand the scope of jazz performance, created new spaces for the elevation of the music, and mentored a generation of musicians.

Getting the *Work Done*

Few could have deduced that Gillespie sending Melba Liston to check on the wellbeing of friend and fellow musician Mary Williams would spark a musical partnership between the two. In preparation for Williams's performance with the Gillespie band at the 1957 Newport Jazz Festival, Liston not only wrote arrangements based on several of the pianist's well-known tunes but also led the rehearsals that prepared the band for this segment of the performance. Williams's performance with the group consisted primarily of three movements drawn from the *Zodiac Suite*. In addition to these reworkings of the *Zodiac Suite*, Liston also produced a short musical interlude that accompanied Williams as she entered the stage. The medley was based on two well-known melodies—the blues "Roll 'Em" and the bop tune "In the Land of Oo Blah Dee." "Roll 'Em" resulted from a request by Benny Goodman for Williams to write a blues for his band. In 1937 she presented him with the tune arranged in the boogie-woogie piano style she had been exposed to in Kansas City. It was just one of a few of Williams's compositions that would translate the rhythmic and motivic structure of the boogie-woogie genre into the big band idiom. "Roll 'Em" became a hit for Goodman, who continued to work with Williams throughout the 1940s and 1950s. "Oo-Bla-Dee" was a highly rhythmic tune that drew on bebop's short melodic phrases and the jive dialect that framed the genre's culture. It was written for and recorded by Gillespie in 1949 and featured vocals by Joe Carroll. The medley, though less than a minute long, displayed Liston's ability to master Williams's sound and create a snapshot of her musical contributions to big band and modern jazz. Liston would later expand this medley to include "What's Your Story Morning Glory" and "A Fungus Amungus," and this would serve as Williams's entrance music for the 1964 Pittsburgh Jazz Festival.

Liston's synthesis of Williams's style is most evident in her arrangement based on selected movements of *The Zodiac Suite*. Written in 1945, the *Zodiac Suite* was based on jazz musicians born under the astrological signs and had initially been written for combo (piano, bass, and drum). It was later scored for small chamber orchestra by Williams and Milt Orent but had never been arranged for big band. Liston's arrangements of "Virgo," "Libra," and "Aries" transformed these movements from works reflecting the chamber-jazz aesthetic into swinging big band arrangements. The medley started with "Virgo," a bop-influenced blues that Liston reconceived through motivic interplay between various sections of the band and Williams's piano. Williams's original melody is not altered, but Liston does score the full, lush chords that the pianist played on the original recording from 1945 (Asch 620 and Asch 621) into material played at different points by first the sax section, then the brass instruments, and later the entire band. Although the performance swings, its recording, *Dizzy Gillespie at Newport*, reveals the difficulty that the band had at various points trying to navigate the intricate nature of Liston's arrangement.¹¹

Williams calls out with a few notes, which are answered by the saxes, to initiate the transition into "Libra." Liston did not alter the original tempo of "Libra," deciding instead to remain true to the slow and rhapsodic nature of the work. No doubt this was done to create an emotional contrast to the previous movement. "Libra" is impressionistic in nature and features the band playing lush, colorful, and expansive chords. But the interplay between band and piano is suspended early in this movement, and Williams moves into a solo that becomes more and more disjointed rhythmically as she continues. Eventually the drummer and bassist drop out, leaving Williams to improvise in a manner that completely obscures the rhythmic pulse initiated at the beginning of the work. There is a return to tempo with the entrance of a muted trumpet solo under which Williams plays lush arpeggios. The band once again drops out as Williams begins another solo. The band re-enters with saxes playing the main motive before Williams once again plays the next phrases of the melody that segue into full-band ascending chords before the final loud dissonant chord. Williams goes right into the melody for "Aries" before the band enters with dissonant punctuations. Overall, "Aries" received less treatment by Liston, and the majority of the movement featured Williams offering up segments of the main theme.

The performance not only documented that the pianist had not lost her musical prowess as a soloist but also indicated that Liston had developed the ear to synthesize Williams's music in new ways without compromising

11. This analysis is based on the recording "Dizzy Gillespie at Newport" Polygram Records, 1992.

the uniqueness of Williams's sound. Another highlight of the 1957 Newport performance was Liston's solo on the swinging blues tune "Cool Breeze." While the tune had been recorded a year earlier featuring a solo by trombonist Frank Rehak, at the Newport it became illustrative of Liston's role as an instrumentalist in Gillespie's band. Liston's solo, the first, reveals an aggressive, advanced technique and a progressive approach to improvisation. Most important, it is one of the few recordings documenting Liston in a live performance setting with the Gillespie band.¹²

In the months following the performance, Liston and Williams collaborated in a recording session for Roulette Records. The three-hour session, consisting of Liston's arrangements of some of Williams's most well-known works, was never released, and all that remains as evidence of the session are the tapes that Williams kept and a photo essay created by famed photographer Chuck Stewart.¹³ Despite Liston's work with other musicians during this period, Williams continued to procure her assistance with various projects. In the early 1960s, this would include two hallmarks of Williams's career: the album *Mary Lou Williams Presents The Black Christ of the Andes*, and the 1964 Pittsburgh Jazz Festival.

"Black Christ of the Andes"

In the early 1960s, Williams, more committed than ever to her faith, began experimenting with writing sacred jazz compositions. These works fused biblical scripture and portions of the Catholic liturgy with modern jazz harmonies and nuances to create a new form of jazz and sacred music. The emergence of these compositions coincided with Vatican II, and, in time, Williams's music became central in advancing the inclusion of diverse music in the celebration of the mass as well as the Church's evolving position on civil rights. It would also become an important aspect of Williams's evangelistic efforts, which positioned jazz as music that could minister to mental and emotional needs of people. She would not refer to her music as sacred jazz, but as "music for the soul." The first composition in this vein was the vocal work entitled "A Hymn in Honor of St. Martin De Porres," an anthem written for eight-part choir (SSAATTBB) and based on a text commemorating the life of De Porres, the first Negro saint canonized by the Catholic Church. The work was first performed in November of 1963 at St. Francis Xavier Church (Kernodle 2004, 201). At some point during this period,

12. "Cool Breeze" is also contained on the recording "Dizzy Gillespie at Newport."

13. It is not clear from extant documents why Roulette did not release the recording. The tapes and photos from the session are now contained in the Mary Lou Williams Collection at the Institute of Jazz Studies at Rutgers University in Newark, NJ.

Liston scored “St. Martin” for a small chamber orchestra (instrumentation included flute, clarinet, two alto saxes, two tenor saxes, baritone sax, four trumpets, three French horns, four trombones, piano, bass, and drums).

While the score for this arrangement exists, there is no evidence that Williams ever performed this setting. I believe, based on the activities the two were engaged in during the period, that Liston’s arrangement was prepared for a 1963 performance of jazz at Philharmonic Hall that featured Gillespie and Williams. The concert, a benefit for the Symphony of Musical Arts marked the first time black performers were allowed to perform at the venue. Integrating Lincoln Center had seemingly been one of the initiatives discussed by Liston, Williams, and several other musicians. According to Williams, “The whole thing was prejudiced . . . Melba Liston and a lot of the musicians [were] having meetings up in Harlem and [they were] talking about Philharmonic” (1973, 166). It is not clear from the extant sources what the group had planned, but close friends of Williams asked that she dissuade the group from protesting. Instead, Father Anthony Woods, the religious confidant of Williams, raised enough money to book the Philharmonic and sponsored the concert that featured Gillespie’s band and Williams. This raises the question as to what motivated Williams and Liston to produce this new setting of “St. Martin De Porres.” Were they hoping to replicate the 1946 collaboration with the Carnegie Pops Orchestra in the performance of her *Zodiac Suite*? Had she planned to include the work as one of the final excerpts of the “History of Jazz” retrospective that she ultimately performed during the concert? Unfortunately a definitive answer to these questions cannot be given at this time. However, what is clear is that Liston worked with Williams in not only creating this new genre of sacred jazz but also promoting it to sacred and secular audiences.

Liston’s role in advancing Williams’s sacred music extended into the 1964 recording sessions that would produce the LP *Mary Lou Williams Presents The Black Christ of the Andes*. The album, the first of three released on the Williams’s own label *Mary Records*, featured a mixture of sacred and secular pieces recorded in late 1963. In addition to standards like Billy Taylor’s “A Grand Night for Swingin’” and Gershwin’s “It Ain’t Necessarily So,” the session produced performances of Williams’s originals—“A Fungus Amungus,” “Dirge Blues,” and “Miss D. D.” The focal point for some scholars of Williams’s music, however, has been the religious works debuted on this album (Kernodle 1997; Kernodle 2004; Murchison 2002). In addition to “St. Martin De Porres,” the album featured three other vocal works, a cantata in a style similar to “St. Martin” called “The Devil,” and two swinging hymns—“Anima Christi” and “Praise the Lord”—that were written by Liston. These two hymns reveal that Liston’s conceptions of sacred jazz were different from those heard in “St. Martin De Porres.” Her

arrangements reflected more of the gospel and congregational traditions she had been exposed to during her early years. "St. Martin De Porres" and "The Devil" reflected a connection with the music of the Post-Council of Trent Catholic church, with its emphasis on an intricate, unaccompanied, homophonic choral style. But "Anima Christi" and "Praise the Lord" displayed a stronger musical and cultural connection between gospel, blues, and modern jazz.

"Anima Christi" was written in standard hymn or strophic form, and the 6/8 meter evoked the feeling of the swinging gospel ballad style popularized by gospel composer Lucie Campbell and the gospel group the Angelic Gospel Singers. The instrumentation was expanded beyond the traditional combination of piano, bass, and drums and included electric guitar and B-flat bass clarinet. It was also scored for male soloist (tenor) and small mixed group, which pointed back to the gospel group sound that had become a signature of black gospel practices. Notations in the extant scores indicate that Liston had a clear sense of the style and feeling that the hymn's prayer should invoke. The soloist was instructed to sing in a "funky gospel style," which was periodically accompanied by the background voices interjecting with harmonized responses. The text is a prayer to God for protection against the evils of the world and for a merciful response toward sins. The mood of the composition is established by the clarinet, which plays a rhythmic figure that serves as the underline ostinato heard throughout the entire performance. Unlike the techniques employed in "The Devil" and "St. Martin De Porres," "Anima Christi" displayed more flexibility in the singer's rendition of the text and melody. There is no doubt in hearing this work that Liston was drawing on the congregational singing practices she heard during her early years.

"Praise the Lord" further established the connection between gospel, jazz, and blues with a rhythmic vamp established by bass, drums, guitar, and piano, and a tenor solo, played by Budd Johnson, that was reminiscent of the shouts and moans of the black church. Johnson's solo segued into vocalist Jimmy Mitchell rhythmically reciting (or "rapping") the lyrics that combine scriptural references from Psalms 148 and 150 with excerpts of a Medieval prayer. This act of "rapping" is suspended on the chorus, as Mitchell transitions to singing the text "everybody clap your hands." The next chorus featured Mitchell's verbal exclamations being answered by a chorus of singers. The track ended with the song mirroring the frenetic and improvisatory nature of the Baptist and Pentecostal church before fading out. In addition to writing these works, Liston also conducted the band and singers during the recording session. "Anima Christi" and "Praise the Lord" were significant contributions to Williams's repertory of sacred works, and they greatly influenced her compositional approaches, as in

subsequent years she would include many of these stylistic elements in her jazz masses.

Pittsburgh Jazz Festival

In addition to promoting the *Black Christ of the Andes LP*, in 1964 Williams began traveling back and forth to Pittsburgh to visit her ailing mother. Father Woods initiated a meeting between the pianist and the Bishop of Pittsburgh, John J. Wright, in hopes that he could assist Williams while she was in the city. Woods wrote to Wright, explaining Williams's importance and her deep abiding faith, and, upon her arrival, she met with the Bishop. After a short conversation about her family and faith, Mary explained to him the benefits of adding jazz education to the curriculum of the city's Catholic schools. He was hesitant, stating that he had always associated jazz with drugs and drug addicts. She corrected him, stating that drugs were more prevalent in commercial rock than in jazz and that the latter provided a more positive means for expression. Bishop Wright, who had been quite invested in revitalizing black neighborhoods and providing educational and recreational activities for underprivileged children, was receptive to Mary's ideas but felt that the schools were not ready to integrate jazz into the curriculum just yet. Instead, he proposed that the Church sponsor a citywide jazz festival.

By 1964, the jazz festival, first introduced in 1948, had grown to be a very important venue in terms of advancing and promoting jazz. The first American festival, the Newport Jazz Festival, was established in 1954 by the collective efforts of George Wein and Elaine and Louis Lorillard. The festival's structure, which included live musical performances and academic panels, became a blueprint for subsequent festivals. In time, the Newport not only became a vehicle for the performance of more experimental works but also was instrumental in resurrecting the careers of a number of musicians including Duke Ellington and Miles Davis. The Festival was documented in the 1958 film *Jazz on a Summer's Day*, and, over the years, numerous recordings of performances were released. In the decade since its debut, the Newport Festival had grown in popularity and importance, and Williams hoped to achieve similar results with the Pittsburgh Jazz Festival.

The primary objective of the festival was to raise money to fund the Catholic Youth Organization (CYO), which provided educational and recreational facilities in underprivileged areas. But, Williams also viewed it as an opportunity to highlight Pittsburgh's importance in jazz history, which had contributed some notable musicians including Earl Hines, Errol Garner, and Billy Strayhorn (H. Garland 1964, 13). The festival's dates were set for

June 19–20, and the excitement surrounding the endeavor escalated as the date approached. The governor of the state served as honorary chairman, and the Mayor of Pittsburgh, Joseph Barr, proclaimed June as “Jazz Month” (H. Garland 1964, May, 23).

Although Pittsburgh had cultivated a strong musical scene in the early twentieth century, in the decades that had passed since the end of World War II, its musical activity had dissipated. Wiley Avenue, which had become the training ground for many early jazz musicians in the city, including Williams, had become an urban wasteland inhabited by vacant buildings and drug addicts. Only two clubs offering live jazz performances remained in the city—The Crawford Grill and the Hurricane. The possibilities of a major jazz festival coming to Pittsburgh would not only bring revenue to the city but could also resurrect the jazz scene. Wright assigned Father Michael Williams, Director of the Pittsburgh CYO, to work directly with the pianist and allotted \$30,000 as seed money.

Williams focused on the planning of the festival, which provided her with a temporary escape from the ailing health of her mother and the consuming debt she faced back in New York. She enlisted the help of George Wein, who assisted in the planning, promotion, and solicitation of some of the performers. Williams also called upon Liston, who aided in the coordination of the festival’s activities and was named musical director. In this capacity the responsibility of outlining the musical focus of the festival resided with Liston. Although each of the headliners planned their own set list, Liston was responsible for determining what the festival big band would play during their own set and as incidental music. Liston selected the band’s personnel, which consisted of a number of musicians she had worked with over the years and some local jazz musicians. The band would be called the Pittsburgh Jazz Orchestra and would take on many different manifestations over the course of the next forty years.

Liston began work on several arrangements that coincided with the various sets she outlined in her notes on the Festival. These works included arrangements of Ellington’s “Cottontail” and the “Blues” from *Black, Brown, and Beige* for Ben Webster’s performance as well as a number of tunes for Pittsburgh native and singer Dakota Staton. But much of time was devoted to the music that would form Mary Lou Williams’s set, which was being heralded as her “homecoming” (P. Garland 1964, 9).

The two began working immediately on a new arrangement of “St. Martin De Porres,” which, in its new form, was written for big band instrumentation and a solo vocalist. Williams thought the spiritual message of text could best be conveyed through an interpretation in dance, so she contacted Alvin Ailey in hopes he would choreograph a series of dances

to the composition. Ailey was unavailable, so she contacted Bernice Johnson, the wife of saxophonist Budd Johnson and the founder of the Bernice Johnson Dancers. The two conceptualized dances for not only "St. Martin De Porres" but also for the composition "Praise the Lord." Williams also wanted to include her early arrangements into the program Liston was developing for the all-star big band's performance that featured Thad Jones, Snooky Young, Ben Webster, Budd Johnson, and Wendell Marshall. Liston came up with an arrangement that expanded the short medley she had composed years earlier for Williams's Newport performance into a more developed overture that included thematic material drawn from "Roll 'Em," "What's Your Story Morning Glory," "In the Land of Oo Bla Dee," and "A Fungus Amungus." The work served as the opening for both days of the festival.

The preparatory work conducted by Liston and Williams coalesced into a two-day festival that drew a crowd of over thirteen thousand to the Civic Arena in June 1964. The festival featured performances from Thelonius Monk, Dave Brubeck, Art Blakey, Jimmy Smith, and local musicians such as Walt Harper, Dakota Staton, and Harold Betters. The evening, however, belonged to Pittsburgh's first lady of jazz—Mary Lou Williams—whose performance was highly acclaimed. Liston was also singled out as one of the festival's stars because of her intricate arrangements and strong leadership of the festival big band. The critic for the *Pittsburgh Courier* asserted the following in relation to the Saturday night performance:

The big band sounded better, now that the musicians had had a day to become acquainted with the arrangements. Now Melba Liston paused to speak of her long romance with the trombone—such an unlikely instrument for a lady. "I've been playing it since I was a little girl . . . I didn't even know what it was, at first, but I just liked the way it looked. Everyone kept trying to get me to play something else, but every time they took it away from me, I'd cry. I just like the way it looks. . . . It's such an elegant instrument. I even try to look like one myself." I noted the long lines of her white gown and black lace bolero. Yes, Melba did look like a trombone, in some surrealist way. When a fan commented on the complexity of her arrangements, Melba laughed, "Don't mind that I do the tough ones because those are the sort of jobs I usually get. Deep down inside, I have a big streak of rock 'n' roll in me." (P. Garland 1964, 1)

In addition to her role as conductor, Liston also played trombone on the set featuring Ben Webster, which included the arrangements referenced above as well as Liston's composition "Len Sirrah" and the Al Grey original "Tacos and Grits." Reviewers for *Down Beat* and *Stereo Review* made specific references to Liston's solos during this set (Kohler 1964; Dance 1964). Both nights ended with Williams and the dancers returning for performances of "Anima Christi" and "Praise the Lord."

At the end of the second day, Father Williams announced that the Festival was a “go” for the following year. Despite the enthusiasm the Festival sparked, no profit was made. The fragile financial health of the Festival would greatly undermine its viability over the next few years.

While Mary Lou Williams and George Wein returned as coproducers of the 1965 Festival, Liston did not return as musical director. It is not clear, from the extant documents, why she did not reprise her role as musical director. The program for the 1965 Festival indicates that there was no festival big band and that the concerts consisted primarily of guest artists such as the Miles Davis Quintet, Thelonius Monk, The Modern Jazz Quartet, and the orchestras of Count Basie and Duke Ellington. Even Williams, who had been the headliner for the 1964 Festival, was noticeably absent except for the piano workshop held on Sunday afternoon and a short set of solo piano. There seems to have been a power shift in the production staff of the Festival in subsequent years. While Williams and Wein returned in 1965, the following year the Festival listed only Wein’s name as producer. Williams is only credited with helping behind the scenes in program notes (Pittsburgh Jazz Festival Program). There is no evidence that Williams or Liston returned as performers in subsequent years, and the festival’s inability to generate a substantial profit eventually led to it ending. But for those two days in 1964, Williams and Liston earned a place in jazz history as the first African American women to produce a major American jazz festival. Their roles as producer and musical director would also foreshadow the emergence of the women-directed and women-focused music festivals of the 1970s and 1980s.¹⁴

Conclusion

I had to prove myself, just like Jackie Robinson. Now I belong to all the guys, and they will take care of me. I don’t have to worry. I’m free all over the world. Musicians will take care of Melba. Not to worry. But another young woman musician comes along, they’re not going to get that.

—Liston (Dahl 1982, 258)

Melba Liston and Mary Lou Williams would professionally go in different directions in the 1970s, but they maintained a close and personal relationship that is documented in the cards and letters housed in the Mary Lou Williams Collection at the Institute of Jazz Studies at Rutgers University. Their professional experiences during the 1970s situated both of them as

14. The festival was resurrected during the 1980s, and the Pittsburgh Jazz Orchestra, resurrected by Nathan Davis, became a fixture at the event.

agents of knowledge as they transitioned into teaching positions. In the early 1970s, Liston went to Jamaica, where she served as director of the Afro-American Department of the Institute of Music in Jamaica, and, in 1977, Williams joined the faculty of Duke University as its first Artist in Residence. Through these positions, both women created inclusive and innovative pedagogies that integrated the teaching of jazz history with the performance of corresponding repertory. They would also be championed and celebrated for their contributions to jazz throughout the 1970s. And while each would eschew the terminology “feminist” or any connections with many of the social movements of the time, their mentorship of younger musicians would position them in a larger ideological struggle surrounding race in the feminist movement.

During the 1970s the personal and professional networks that women musicians had created among themselves coalesced into organizations and programming initiatives that were initially outgrowths of the feminist movement. While these festivals, conferences, and organizations sought to promote women musicians, a problematic trend emerged—the noticeable exclusion of young, emerging black women musicians. Where jazz histories had previously constructed and promoted the trope of the exceptional woman as a means of rationalizing the exclusion of women musicians, the feminist movement expanded this trope through its perspective on race. The movement came to promote what I call the *exceptional black woman*. This concept defines the impact and influence of black women only in relation to the contributions of pioneering black women musicians like Liston, Williams, Bessie Smith, and Ma Rainey. While these efforts to reclaim and situate the pioneering contributions of these women musicians in larger contexts of jazz and blues history were laudable, they served as a means through which the exclusion or subordination of contemporary black women musicians could be rationalized. Black women were generally excluded from leadership roles within these organizations and festivals, while their white female peers were heavily promoted. Although Melba Liston and Mary Lou Williams emerged out of the scene as celebrated women, their younger black counterparts were largely ignored (Gossett and Johnson 1979, 4).

As a result, black women musicians, much like their counterparts in other social movement organizations, began to create their own collectives and support groups (Springer 2001; Dahl 1984). The Universal Jazz Coalition (UJC), started in the late 1970s by Corbi Narita, provided much-needed support to emerging women musicians regardless of race and ethnicity. The organization not only hosted concerts (Annual Women in Jazz Festival) and panel discussions, it also sponsored workshops and served as a repository of

information that educated young musicians in how to manage their careers. Liston became associated with the UJC in 1980 when she formed the coed band Melba Liston and Company, which featured various women, most notably bassist Carline Ray, drummer Dotty Dodgion, pianist Francesca “Chessie” Tanksley, and tenor saxophonist Erica Lindsay—all of whom were members of the UJC. This band facilitated the transference of knowledge between Liston and a generation of black women musicians that was similar to that found in the relationships she formed with Alma Hightower and Billie Holiday. The group toured Asia and the U.S. throughout 1980 and was highly acclaimed for its musicianship. Over the next few years, Liston would perform with varying personnel—both male and female—until a stroke left her partially paralyzed (Watrous 1999)

This essay began with a discussion of scholar/activist Angela Davis’s work, in which she posits that for too long the emotional relationships shared by black women have not been acknowledged for their importance in enabling these women to achieve a certain level of autonomy and independence. The professional and personal experiences recounted in this work seek to refute the notion that the competitive personalities of black female jazz musicians prevented them from forming significant and lasting relationships. These experiences not only speak to the type of relationships that developed between these women but also reveal how these women created opportunities that validated their presence in certain spaces and developed systems that promoted the transference of knowledge to one another, insuring their mental and physical survival in the environments and scenarios they functioned in. Finally, these exchanges also indicate how black women musicians: 1) established lived experience as a criteria for establishing meaning and relevance; 2) prioritized verbal communication as a primary means of transferring knowledge; and 3) developed an ethic of accountability that defined how they engaged with each other and their social/professional circles.¹⁵

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15. Chapter 6 of Collins’s *Black Feminist Thought* (2000) outlines these as emblematic of how black women create their own system of validation.

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