

## A Brief History of British Women Jazz Players

The history of jazz in Britain has been scrutinised in notable publications including Parsonage (2005) *The Evolution of Jazz in Britain, 1880-1935*, McKay (2005) *Circular Breathing: The Cultural Politics of Jazz in Britain*, Simons (2006) *Black British Swing* and Moore (forthcoming 2007) *Inside British Jazz*. This body of literature provides a useful basis for specific consideration of the role of women in British jazz. This area is almost completely unresearched with a few notable exceptions which include Jen Wilson's work (in her dissertation entitled *Syncopated Ladies: British Jazzwomen 1880-1995 and their Influence on Popular Culture*) and George McKay's chapter 'From "Male Music" to Feminist Improvising' in *Circular Breathing*. Therefore, this chapter will provide a necessarily selective overview of British women in jazz, and offer some limited exploration of the critical issues raised. It is hoped that this will provide a stimulus for more detailed research in the future.

Any consideration of this topic must necessarily foreground **Ivy Benson**<sup>1</sup>, who played a fundamental role in encouraging and inspiring female jazz musicians in Britain through her various 'all-girl' bands. Benson was born in Yorkshire in 1913 and learned the piano from the age of five. She was something of a child prodigy, performing on Children's Hour for the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) at the age of nine. She also appeared under the name of 'Baby Benson' at Working Men's Clubs (private social clubs founded in the nineteenth century in industrial areas of Great Britain, particularly in the North, with the aim of providing recreation and education for working class men and their families). Benson was taught a range of instruments by her father who played in the Leeds Symphony Orchestra and in pit bands and musical comedy ensembles. She specialised on clarinet and alto saxophone, and preferred popular music to the chagrin of her father who wanted her to be a classical pianist, still considered a more appropriate musical outlet for young girls at that time. She worked in a shop for a while, playing in her spare time, and spent several years in Edna Croudson's Rhythm Girls, a Yorkshire-based sextet, before moving to London where she became featured soloist with the band Teddy Joyce and his Girlfriends.

Encouraged by Jack Hylton, Benson formed the original 'Ivy Benson Rhythm Girls' which appeared in an all girl revue called *Meet the Girls* starring comedienne Hylda Baker in 1940. Following this, Benson organised bands of various sizes known variously as 'Rhythm Girls', 'Ladies Orchestra' and latterly 'Showband', and sometimes including a string section, for the rest of her career. The circumstances of World War Two, with many male musicians going off to fight, meant that Benson's groups had many opportunities to perform around the country at ballrooms and theatres, and also at military bases under the auspices of the Entertainment's National Servicemen's Association (ENSA). At the same time the number of girls who married visiting American GI's and left the band was a significant problem for Ivy. She

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<sup>1</sup> Ivy Benson: Born Leeds, Yorkshire, 11 November 1913 Died Clacton, Essex, 6 May 1993.

recruited many of her players (including Gracie Cole, see below) from brass bands, ensembles particularly popular in the North of the country where they were formed within the communities surrounding collieries and other industrial sites.

1943 was a significant year for the Benson's band, with a 22 week residency at the London Palladium, a top venue for variety performances in the capital, on the same bill as comedian Max Miller and popular piano duo Rawicz and Landauer. In the same year the Rhythm Girls were contracted as a BBC House Band, based in Bristol in South West England. Whilst some male bandleaders including Jack Hylton and Joe Loss were always supportive of Benson, this booking caused outrage amongst many male musicians. Shelia Tracy recalled 'The male bandleaders didn't want to know her, they loathed her guts. And the reviews for the first broadcast were vitriolic.' (quoted in O'Brien, 2002:37). Nevertheless, the Rhythm Girls returned to the Palladium on the top of the bill for six months in 1944 and performed as part of the "Jazz Jamboree" at the Stoll Theatre in London. In 1946 the band was booked for the first post war broadcasts on the BBC. Again sexism reared its ugly head when the Stoll Theatre group who provided Ivy with much work, threatened to cancel her contracts, apparently 'fearful of the repercussions of this All Girl phenomenon' (Ravenhill, 2004). In retaliation, Benson took the band on their first European tour to Berlin with ENSA. This began a regular series of visits to American bases in Germany and extensive tours all over Europe and to the Middle East.

By continuing to focus on the nostalgic sounds of the war years Benson's band survived the changes that took place within the music industry in the 1950s including the downsizing of bands and the introduction of rock and roll. She had to change her name to Ivy Benson and her Showband due to the 1975 Sex Discrimination Act which made discrimination against women or men illegal in the workplace - she joked that any man could join the band if they could fit into a 10-16 sized dress! (Ravenhill, 2004). During her last years, the band played mainly for private functions with the last gig at the Savoy Hotel in London in 1982.

Benson's band was by no means the first all-female ensemble in Britain, and the roots of the concept can be traced back to at least the late nineteenth century. Judith Tick observes the increasing ease of access to a musical education (including at conservatoire level) for women during the nineteenth century and their subsequent entry into the profession, noting that 'Whereas in 1841 around 13.7% of the musicians and music teachers in England were female, by 1891 the figure was around 50%, and in 1921 it climbed to 76%'. However, professional possibilities for women instrumentalists at the turn of the century were restricted to music teaching as they were 'excluded from professional orchestras, from conducting posts, from positions in universities and from the professional musical life of the Church' (Fuller, 1992 cited in Tick). This situation led to the founding of several all-female orchestras and chamber groups around the turn of the century, as well as all-female ensembles with more mainstream repertoire which performed in theatres,

department stores, restaurants and popular cafes such as the Lyons Corner Houses which sprang up in London at this time (Gillett, 2000:190). Greta Kent confirms the widespread popularity of Ladies Orchestras at this time (cited in Wilson, 43).

Both the concept and reality of jazz in early twentieth century Britain was closely linked with the contemporaneous emancipation of women. When the word 'jazz' began to appear in print in Britain (prior to the arrival of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band in London 1919) it used more frequently as a verb than a noun to denote a new, freer, style of dance. It is no coincidence that the term 'jazzing' was also used as a metaphor for sexual activity (Parsonage, 2005:21). Some women had gained not only the right to vote in 1918 (although it was not until ten years later that they were granted the same voting rights as men) but also social and sexual freedom during the First World War where circumstances allowed more informal contact with men. Subsequently, many women were determined to live life to the full in the spirit of the post-War 'Jazz Age'. Dance halls and nightclubs were at the centre of the fashionable world, and jazz provided the soundtrack to free expression of a new female identity through dancing and dress, and more problematically, promiscuity and consumption of alcohol and drugs. (Parsonage, 2005:41-42)

Women were active as musicians in jazz and dance bands both alongside men and in all-female groups as well as in the position of bandleader, especially in regional communities outside London. For example, Benson alumnus Eunice Cox recalled that her mother led a band in the Nottingham area in the 1930s [[http://www.ivybenson-online.com/Biographies/Eunice\\_Cox.htm](http://www.ivybenson-online.com/Biographies/Eunice_Cox.htm)]. The jazz magazine *Melody Maker*, published in London from 1926, provides a snapshot of the considerable extent of female participation in British jazz (see Wilson, 1996: Chapter 2). In the years between the wars all-girl bands were extremely popular and successful. Jen Wilson cites the example of Ynet Miles and Her All Ladies Band, who won the Greater London Open Dance Band Contest in 1927. Some of these groups were led by women such as Blanche Coleman, Gloria Gaye and Dorothy Marno, and others by men including Teddy Joyce, Don Rico and Rudy Starita. Whilst British jazzwomen were often appreciated for their musical abilities, critics would also tend to focus on matters of appearance. For example, Ynet Miles's band was praised not only for their performance, but also 'their silver frocks made a charming picture which was possibly the cause of the downfall of many of the male competitors'. (quoted in Wilson, 1996:54). Wilson points out that female were often paid less than men and were subject to persistent discrimination by critics, employers and even the Musicians' Union.

Although Ivy Benson's bands were remarkably successful in Britain and Europe over a forty year period, her story demonstrates that whilst there have always been men who have championed, supported and encouraged women jazz players there are also many who, albeit often implicitly, have done the opposite. Benson's bands provided important opportunities for in excess of 250 women to have high-profile careers in music, and it was not until the 1950s that women could begin to sustain these independently, performing

alongside men at the highest levels. Many women who were given their first break in the Benson band went on to become major British jazz artists, and the impact that Benson had on the scene and the development and training of a whole generation of young British players, particularly ‘the inspiration and empowerment that Benson seemed able to transmit to her musicians around female music making’ (McKay 283) should not be underestimated. However, the all-girl format also served to increasingly restrict the band to being a nostalgic novelty, with the latter years spent performing at military bases and holiday camps.

With this in mind, it is interesting to note that later Benson *alumni* ‘graduated’ and formed their own all-female groups which have provided opportunities for the explicit or implicit expression of feminist ideologies. **Deirdre Cartwright**<sup>2</sup> explained in a recent interview that she was first drawn to the guitar by Marc Bolan’s performances with the English rock band TRex and noted the absence of female role models in the early 1970s when she began playing. She was self-taught, picking up ideas about jazz from gigs, recordings, books and magazines such as *Melody Maker*. Whilst acknowledging the importance of Ivy Benson’s band, with whom she recorded in 1976, as the only professional women’s band at the time which provided a good source of income along with good engagements for female musicians, Cartwright was liberated by the spirit of second wave feminism to find her own musical voice as a female guitarist (not just a guitarist). In the mid-1970s she started to play in a band called Jam Today with **Laka Daisical** and also met bassist **Alison Rayner**, who she continues to work with to this day. Jam Today played mainly covers, blues, Latin and funky tunes. She also met Ruthie Smith who introduced her to the London left wing feminist political field. Cartwright recalled that most of the female players in the 1970s were in their late teens or early twenties and played together at gigs, parties, benefits, major political conferences and many women only events. She describes Jam Today as a very political band which spent time discussing the role of women in the world and whether, for example, women should play with men; if they should play on a stage or even whether they should play instruments made by men. The group set up their own feminist record label (Stroppy Cow), and members of the band were active in constructing support networks for female musicians (McKay, 286).

At the same time, Cartwright was also playing in South London pubs with a heavy rock band called Painted Lady. Whilst the repertoire was mainly Thin Lizzy or Led Zeppelin, she would slip in the odd John Coltrane blues or other jazz standard. Such juxtapositions are common in feminist bands, as George McKay points out, ‘For these women musicians, it was important to be more fluid in their musical approach, less masculinely purist’ (McKay 285). Cartwright also organised jam sessions for women only with invited guests where they could learn from each other ‘in a haphazard way’. This became the basis for The Guest Stars, a highly successful small group in the 1980s with a repertoire of standards and original compositions ranging in style from

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<sup>2</sup> Born London, 27 July 1956

'jazz to Latin, African to pop, always with space for improvisation, and in their live performances always emphasizing dancing by the audience' (McKay 285). The Guest Stars toured extensively and recorded several albums during the 1980s, reforming in 2004.

The most overt expression of feminism by a jazz-related group can be found in the radical Feminist Improvising Group, formed in 1977. The group included by Scottish free jazz vocalist **Maggie Nichols**<sup>3</sup>, as well as musicians drawn from art music and experimental rock.

The Guest Stars personnel was the basis for the formation of two all-female big bands; the Lydia D'Ustebyn Swing Orchestra, which Cartwright describes as 'in a way a tribute' to Benson, and the Sisterhood of Spit, formed in early 1980s, the name of which was congruent with contemporary punk and made reference to the masculine big bands 'Brotherhood of Breath' (McKay, 330). The pattern of female musicians initially forming small groups from the 1960s but later developing big bands is replicated amongst several Benson alumni. Drummer **Crissy Lee**<sup>4</sup>, left Benson and formed her band 'The Beat Chicks' in the late 1960s, and her jazz orchestra flourished in the 1990s. Trombonist **Annie Whitehead**<sup>5</sup> had a successful career within all-female and mixed gender groups and also as a session musician since leaving Benson in the 1970s. Interestingly, Whitehead performed with both the aforementioned Sisterhood and Brotherhood bands. Her style is particularly influenced by Jamaican and African music. She began leading and writing for her own bands in the 1980s with which she has toured internationally. In 2002 she formed the all-female Vortex Foundation Big Band.

Whitehead's career serves as a reminder that women have also worked successfully within the traditional male dominated jazz scene in Britain. Trumpeter **Gracie Cole**<sup>6</sup> joined Benson in 1945 for the first foreign trips, and described being in the band at this time as 'thrilling' [[http://www.ivybenson-online.com/Biographies/gracie\\_cole.htm](http://www.ivybenson-online.com/Biographies/gracie_cole.htm)]. Like Benson, Cole was born and brought up in the North, and was taught by her father. She was playing solo concerts by the age of 13, and performed with famous brass bands including Grimethorpe, Foden's Motorworks and Fairey Aviation. Prior to joining Benson's group, Cole played in Gloria Gaye's All Girl Band and in a similar group led by the American percussionist Rudy Starita touring theatres in the UK and working for ENSA. Cole played lead and solo for Benson, and recalled that sometimes after the main show, she together with Benson and Lena Kidd on tenor, would go to a jazz club and blow with the local musicians, an early indication of her prowess as a jazz musician. In 1950, Cole left to join a band led by saxophonist George Evans, and as Val Wilmer mentions, she 'made history as the first woman in Britain to play lead trumpet in an otherwise

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<sup>3</sup> Born Edinburgh, 24 Feb 1948

<sup>4</sup> Born Colchester, Essex 17 June 1943.

<sup>5</sup> Born Oldham, Lancashire, 16 July 1955.

<sup>6</sup> Born Rowlands Gill, 1924, died 2006.

all-male band'. She then joined the Squadronaires, originally the wartime dance orchestra of the Royal Airforce which became a civilian group from 1947, where she played next to Tommy McQuater. Cole formed and led all-girl band on the suggestion of Ted Heath in the mid-1950s. In the reminiscences of Rene Ames, Cole's band demonstrate early signs of what McKay neatly describes as 'the progression from female to feminist music activity' (285):

'Gracie's band was that little bit better than Ivy's, only because Gracie believed that she wanted us to look like men and play like men but Ivy was more into showmanship, more of a cabaret and more of what people wanted to see. Gracie always had us dressing in suits, straight skirts below the knee and men's jackets. Ivy's was more feminine than Gracie's ever was.'

[[http://www.ivybenson-online.com/Tales/Gracie\\_Coles\\_band.htm](http://www.ivybenson-online.com/Tales/Gracie_Coles_band.htm)]

**Kathy Stobart**<sup>7</sup> played with a ladies band in her teens and later had guest appearances with Ivy Benson, but otherwise always played with men. In an interview with Les Tompkins, Kathy stated that she never encountered any prejudice in her early bands as everyone was of an equal standard and not very competitive, she said 'I think they were all fairly fond of me and we all got along fine.' (Ref). However, despite passing a BBC audition with her own band in the late 1940s, she was not offered a broadcasting deal (Wilson, 1996:71). Stobart went on to enjoy a wide ranging career in which she performed with many of the leading British bands, including substantial periods with the British trumpeter Humphrey Lyttleton, in addition to bandleading and teaching.

Other British female musicians have led successful mixed gender bands. These include **Barbara Thompson**<sup>8</sup>, saxophonist and composer, who was classically trained but soon developed her own individual voice across a range of reed instruments including alto, tenor, and soprano saxes and flute. Also former member of the Ivy Benson band, she met her husband the rock drummer John Hiseman in the mid sixties and has led her own band since 1969. Thompson formed her band Paraphernalia in 1977 and was happy to embrace electric instruments and electronics contributing to the development of jazz fusion and jazz rock during the period, but also including a range of other influences including folk elements, tango and world music which gave the ensemble a distinct identity. Diagnosed with Parkinson's disease in 2001, Thompson has given up touring and performing but continues to compose large scale works and to record. Born of Trinidadian parents, saxophonist and composer **Gail Thompson**<sup>9</sup> (no relation to Barbara) led her own bands The Gail Thompson Approach and Gail Force and was a founder member of the Jazz Warriors with Courtney Pine and Gary Crosby in the 1980s. Forced to retire from playing having developed multiple sclerosis later in the decade, she has focussed on composing and bandleading. Following a six-month

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<sup>7</sup> Born South Shields, County Durham, 1 April 1925.

<sup>8</sup> Born Oxford, 27 July 1944

<sup>9</sup> Born Herne Hill, London 15 June 1958

overland musical study visit to Africa in 1988, Gail started a new project called Jazz Africa that quickly developed into a big band that toured the UK. In an interview in the late 1990s, Thompson demonstrates a post-feminist perspective on female jazz musicians: 'I've got nothing against feminism but I don't see why you shouldn't use a man. It's not a novelty any more to have an all-woman band. The novelty now is to have a token man in the band.' (Quoted in Zwerin, 1997)

As in many countries, vocal performance has provided the most accessible route into jazz for women in Britain, and the country has produced and nurtured internationally known singers. **Cleo Laine**<sup>10</sup> worked professionally in the 1950s with the English saxophonist John Dankworth, who then became her husband. Her interpretative and improvisational abilities are highly regarded and she has recorded with musicians including Ray Charles, Mel Torme, George Shearing, Toots Thielemans, Kenny Wheeler and Clark Terry. She has also been active as a performer in genres other than jazz and as an actress. Laine continues to perform and was featured with her husband in a BBC Proms Concert in 2007. Although originally born in the UK **Annie Ross**<sup>11</sup> has been resident in the USA for many years. In Paris in the late 1940s she performed with James Moody, Kenny Clarke, Charlie Parker and Billy Strayhorn. At 21 back in the States, she recorded for Savoy with Clarke, Milt Jackson and Percy Heath; and substituted for Billie Holiday at the New York Apollo (O'Brien, 2002:24). Annie Ross was one of the pioneers of vocalise and a founding member of Lambert Hendricks and Ross, which was considered to be one of the finest vocal ensembles of its time. From the 1960s she has also had a successful career as an actress on stage and screen. **Norma Winstone**<sup>12</sup> is involved in both mainstream jazz, singing standards and also in the avant garde movement, exploring the voice in an experimental, instrumental way. She was involved in groups with Mike Westbrook, John Surman, Kenny Wheeler, Michael Garrick, John Taylor and Mike Gibbs. In the late 1970s she formed Azimuth with John Taylor and Kenny Wheeler which later recorded for ECM and became a highly influential and imaginative outfit. She continues to record and tour internationally.

The tradition of British jazz singers has been continued in recent years by **Anita Wardell**<sup>13</sup> is noted scat and be-bop vocalist, and **Liane Carroll**<sup>14</sup> has always sung a broad range of music including rock, pop, country and blues and took a new departure in 2001 by joining the drum and bass outfit, London

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<sup>10</sup> Born London, 28 Oct 1927

<sup>11</sup> Born Mitcham, England, 25 July 1930

<sup>12</sup> Born London, 23 September 1941

<sup>13</sup> Born Guildford

<sup>14</sup> Born London, 1964

Elektricity. **Tina May**<sup>15</sup>, **Claire Martin**<sup>16</sup>, **Clare Teal**<sup>17</sup> perform mostly standard repertoire, the latter was signed to Sony in the biggest recording deal by any British jazz singer. Other female vocalists have often made important contributions to regional jazz scenes, including **Beryl Bryden**<sup>18</sup> in East Anglia and Cambridge, **Fionna Duncan**<sup>19</sup> in Glasgow and **Carole Clegg**<sup>20</sup> in the North East.

The changing nature of music education and increasing opportunities for this to be accessed by women on an equal basis to men has been influential on the development of female jazz musicians in Britain. A hundred years ago the inclusion of music in the traditional education of 'accomplished' young women provided them with technique which enabled them to perform in popular styles. For example, there was significant female participation in the pre-jazz banjo craze in Britain in the 1880s. In the 1920s, the British pianist **Natalie Spencer** performed with Will Marion Cook's Southern Syncopated Orchestra on their visit to Britain. This group of African American musicians included Sidney Bechet, and performed a wide repertoire including spirituals, ragtime, Cook's own compositions and classical music. Spencer wrote that 'playing in an orchestra composed of people of an entirely different race was a unique, and, as it transpired, a pleasant experience' (1921:409). Her account provides insight into the musicianship required to perform with the orchestra: 'An amusing occupation is "answering each other" – taking a phrase or bit of embellishment that you heard someone else put forth, and putting it in, (usually in another key) in another part of the tune.' (1921:410).

Even before the advent of specific jazz courses, the rigors of a traditional conservatoire training provided a useful training for aspiring jazz musicians. The Trinidadian pianist **Winifred Atwell**<sup>21</sup> came to Britain in 1946 to study at the Royal Academy of Music, but secured success in an act where she played classical music on one piano, and ragtime and boogie woogie on another in clubs and later on television. (McKay 150). **Marian McPartland**<sup>22</sup> left the Guildhall School of Music to perform in vaudeville, and subsequently has enjoyed a long and successful career as a pianist, educator and disc jockey in the USA.

More recently, German-born saxophonist **Ingrid Laubrock** came to London to study with Jean Toussaint and at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama.

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<sup>15</sup> Born Gloucester, 30 March 1961

<sup>16</sup> Born Wimbledon, Surrey, 6 September 1967

<sup>17</sup> Born Skipton, Yorkshire, 14 May, 1973

<sup>18</sup> Born Norwich, Norfolk, 11 May 1920

<sup>19</sup> Born Garelochhead, Dunbartonshire, Scotland 5 November 1939

<sup>20</sup> Born Stanley, County Durham, 19 May 1946

<sup>21</sup> Born Tunapuna, Trinidad, 1914

<sup>22</sup> Born Windsor, England, 20 March 1918

She is part of the acclaimed F-IRE Collective and works in a wide range of musical fields including contemporary classical, theatre and dance groups. In contrast to Cartwright's 'haphazard' method of learning about jazz, formal jazz education is now well-established in Britain, and has contributed to the subsequent successful careers of many musicians including pianist/composers **Nikki Iles** (Leeds College of Music) and **Andrea Vicari** (Guildhall School of Music and Drama), musicians who are now active educators themselves at Middlesex University and Trinity Laban respectively.

Cartwright identified the lack of female role models when she started out in her career, but made a significant impact herself as co-presenter of two series of the BBC television programme "Rockschool" in the 1980s. Several women hold significant positions in educational institutions. These include **Issie Barratt** (composer and Jazz Fellow at Trinity Laban College), **Kathy Dyson** (guitarist and Senior Lecturer at Leeds College of Music), **Paula Gardiner** (bass player and Head of Jazz at the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama), **Louise Gibbs** (vocalist and Senior Lecturer at Leeds College of Music) and **Catherine Parsonage**<sup>23</sup> (musicologist and Head of the Centre for Jazz Studies UK at Leeds College of Music). Women are also taking significant roles within the jazz industry. These include **Janine Irons** MBE, Managing Director and CEO of Dune Records and **Christine Allen**, Head of Basho Records. Ivy Benson *alumni* **Shelia Tracy** has been broadcasting on the BBC for several decades and **Val Wilmer**, who trained as a photographer, has contributed to all the major jazz publications and authored several books.

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<sup>23</sup> Born Greenwich, London 10 March 1976

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