

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis:

IMPROVISED SPACES: THE
INTERSECTIONS OF JAZZWOMEN
COMMUNITIES AND THE WOMEN'S
MUSIC CULTURAL MOVEMENT IN
THE 1970S AND 1980S

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Traditional narratives mark jazz in the 1970s as insignificant to jazz history. The exclusion of this period from jazz scholarship makes invisible the immense musical contributions jazzwomen made during the 1970s, perpetuating the canonical and patriarchal understanding that jazz was and is developed by men. A closer look at jazz spaces in the 1970s and 1980s, as well as other related musical communities, reveals a narrative of jazzwomen's success. In this thesis, I recover the intersections between jazzwomen communities and the Women's Music Cultural Movement in the 1970s and 1980s. Combining analyses of archival materials, oral history interviews, and methods from queer ephemera studies, my thesis demonstrates how a focus on the ephemera of jazzwomen can offer a corrective to dominant jazz histories centered on recordings. Studying women's music and jazzwomen communities side-by-side demonstrates how musical communities, particularly ones built by marginalized individuals, are not insular entities but

complex musical networks. This thesis contributes to larger conversations on the importance of material cultures, feminist histories, and the inclusion and recovery of jazzwomen's narratives.

IMPROVISED SPACES: THE INTERSECTIONS OF JAZZWOMEN COMMUNITIES AND
THE WOMEN'S MUSIC CULTURAL MOVEMENT IN THE 1970S AND 1980S

by

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Dedication

To Claire Daly (1958-2024), the first jazzwoman to mentor me, who encouraged me to be loud and proud on my bari sax and never discouraged my passion for jazz history.

To Ellen Seeling (1950-2025), whose music and story are essential to this thesis and whose fight for jazzwomen's equity will not be forgotten.

And to all jazzwomen and jazzfolks past, present, and future whose stories have not yet been told.

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List of Abbreviations

WJF: Kansas City Women's Jazz Festival

Salute or Salute to Women: Salute to Women in Jazz Festival

UJC: Universal Jazz Coalition

NWMF: National Women's Music Festival

MichFest: Michigan Womyn's Music Festival

RRCEF: Redwood Records Cultural & Educational Fund

Introduction

“I have enjoyed your magazine for some time. But one thing bothers me: down beat seems to be overwhelmingly ‘male.’ The ads, articles and reporting seem to be about 98% on men. This is out of balance with what the real jazz scene is. There are many women in the music who deserve attention and recognition from you.”¹

—Susan Sailow “Male Dominance” from
“Chords and Discords” *Down Beat* November 1978.

“The reviewer seems to have trouble accepting women musicians as anything other than vocalists and/or songwriters. It is also a disgrace that someone as gifted as Brackeen should be praised in such a backhanded manner. Mr. De Muth, and others like him, are going to have to accept the fact that not only are we out here playing jazz, but we’re playing it on pianos, altos, tenors, trumpets, basses, drums...”²

—Kim MacRae “Male chauvinism unveiled” from
“Chords and Discords” *Down Beat* 1979.

The above quotes from the popular jazz magazine *Down Beat*’s “Chords and Discords,” a reader’s feedback section, reveal a common theme— women *Down Beat* readers are upset over the magazine’s patriarchal portrayal of the 1970s jazz scene, a narrative in which women are absent and dismissed. Both Sailow and MacRae’s remarks emphasize that not only do jazzwomen *exist*, but that they are *active* in jazz communities in all capacities. The “Chords and Discords” submissions in *Down Beat* represent the typical absence of jazzwomen in 1970s jazz publications, something that is equally reflected in jazz historiography of the period. With the

¹ Susan Sailow, “Male Dominance,” *Down Beat* 45, no 19 (November 16th, 1978): 8.

² Kim MacRae, “Male chauvinism unveiled,” *Down Beat* 46, no 17 (November 1979): 8.

emergence of jazz fusion and jazz rock alongside a rise in neo-conservative and traditionalist views of jazz, traditional narratives mark jazz in the 1970s as insignificant to jazz history. Likewise, jazzwomen have historically been gatekept from the recording industry leaving little recorded footprint of their contributions. As jazz scholar Darren Mueller explains in *At the Vanguard of Vinyl*, LPs and other recording formats are essential to the “sonic rhetoric of jazz history,” and “the limited inclusion of women on the earliest LPs is thus part of a much longer trajectory of denial and masculine control built into social structures of the jazz business.”³ However, for jazzwomen, the 1970s and 1980s were an essential period of musical growth and community building. The exclusion of this period from jazz scholarship makes invisible the immense musical contributions jazzwomen made during the 1970s and 1980s, perpetuating the canonical and patriarchal understanding that jazz was and is developed by men. A closer look at jazz spaces built by women in the 1970s and 1980s, as well as other women’s music communities, reveals a narrative of jazzwomen’s success.

In this thesis, I reclaim the intersections between jazzwomen communities and the Women’s Music Cultural Movement in the 1970s and 1980s. Studying women’s music and jazzwomen communities side-by-side demonstrates how musical communities, particularly ones built by marginalized individuals, are not insular entities but complex musical networks. Combining analyses of archival materials, oral history interviews, and methods from queer ephemera studies, my thesis demonstrates how a focus on the ephemera of jazzwomen can offer a corrective to dominant jazz histories centered on recordings. This thesis contributes to larger conversations on the importance of material cultures, feminist histories, women’s music histories, and the inclusion and reclamation of jazzwomen’s narratives.

³ Darren Mueller, *At the Vanguard of Vinyl: A Cultural History of the Long-Playing Record in Jazz* (Duke University Press, 2024), 27.

This thesis analyzes archival material from the Women’s Music Archives Records and Collected Music housed at the Smith College Special Collections, the Leonard Feather Collection at the University of Idaho, the Delilah Jackson Papers at Emory University; issues of *Paid My Dues*, *Ms. Magazine*, and *Down Beat*; miscellaneous materials from the Rutgers Institute of Jazz Studies, miscellaneous newspaper clippings from university databases, and Dr. Leigh Pilzer’s personal collection of newspaper clippings on jazzwomen.⁴ This thesis additionally includes oral history interviews conducted with ethnomusicologist and producer Boden Sandstrom, musician and producer June Millington, vocalist Rhiannon from Alive!, and jazz scholar Lara Pellegrinelli.⁵ Following a literature review of gender, sexuality and jazz scholarship, women’s music scholarship, Black feminist theory, and queer theory and ephemera studies this thesis contains two chapters: 1) “Women Can’t Play Jazz”: The Kansas City Women's Jazz Festival and the Universal Jazz Coalition's Salute to Women in Jazz Festival, and 2) “Call It Jazz”: The Recorded Footprint of Jazzwomen in Women’s Music.

Women’s music is rarely defined by specific musical elements but by the targeted audience and values of its community. The sounds of women’s music encompass a diverse array of genres, from folk and singer-songwriter to jazz and blues. Like jazzwomen in jazz historiography, women’s music has been equally undervalued in broader feminist histories. This is in part due to its lesbian-separatist foundations and complicated narratives surrounding the

⁴ Delilah Jackson Papers, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Books Library, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia.; Leigh Pilzer’s Women in Jazz Clippings, Leigh Pilzer’s Personal Collection, College Park, MD; Leonard Feather Collection, International Jazz Collections, University of Idaho, Moscow, Idaho; Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival Records, Sophia Smith Collection of Women’s History, Smith College Special Collections, Smith College, Northampton, MA; Women’s Music Archives Records and Collected Music, Sophia Smith Collection of Women’s History, Smith College Special Collections, Smith College, Northampton, MA.

⁵ Ann Hackler and June Millington, Interview by Lael Dratfield. November 26, 2025. Goshen, MA; Lara Pellegrinelli, Interview by Lael Dratfield, December 9, 2025, Zoom; Rhiannon, Interview by Lael Dratfield, December 8, 2025, Zoom; Boden Sandstrom, Interview by Lael Dratfield. November 13, 2025, Zoom.

exclusion of transwomen. Because the movement centered and celebrated womanhood, women who experienced sexism and homophobia in other musical genres found solace in women's music. Women's music is particularly known for its music festivals, such as the National Women's Music Festival and the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, which were entirely run by women. Additionally, women's music led to the formation of all-women record labels such as Olivia Records and Redwood Records, which became central to the circulation and preservation of women's music. As my research will reclaim, jazzwomen found a freedom in women's music spaces that was not always available to them in jazz spaces. These improvised spaces became restorative locations for nonnormative jazzwomen alienated from traditional jazz spaces.

Recovering the intersection of women's music and jazzwomen communities is imperative to constructing a jazz history that is diverse and inclusive. Jazz and gender scholar Sherrie Tucker has written extensively about the exclusion of women from jazz history and its effect on broader jazz narratives. As Tucker writes regarding 1940s jazzwomen, "I hope...that deconstructing jazz and swing discourses that omit women will yield insights into what it was like for women instrumentalists to break into frameworks that simultaneously facilitated their careers and denied their presence."⁶ Although women's music was a space that facilitated successful musical careers for many jazzwomen in the 1970s and 1980s, it also isolated them from mainstream jazz spaces, including mainstream jazz histories. Beyond the simple reclamation of jazzwomen's narratives, the intersection of jazzwomen communities and women's music demonstrates a collective care that is necessary to women's success in music. In male-dominated spaces, women must work together, on local and national levels, to support each other. Jazzwomen and women's music artists built complex musical networks that allowed for

⁶ Sherrie Tucker, *Swing Shift: "All-Girl" Bands of the 1940s* (Duke University Press, 2000).

generations of women to create music and imagine a music without patriarchy. Studying this intersection not only allows us to reclaim erased narratives but to understand the ways we can build an equitable music futurity.

Literature Review

My methodology is interdisciplinary, incorporating methods from musicology and ethnomusicology, queer theory, feminist theory, Black studies, and ephemera studies. This research builds on the work of gender, sexuality, & jazz and women's music scholars, particularly Sherrie Tucker, Eileen M. Hayes, Carolyn Brewer, and Nichole T. Rustin. My framework also includes Black feminist, queer, and ephemera theories, and is guided by the work of Tina M. Campt, Robin D. G. Kelley, Ann Cvetkovich, José Muñoz, and Sara Ahmed. By using alternative methods of historiography, particularly methods that are prevalent in LGBTQIA+ communities, previously untold narratives can be identified contributing to a more diverse history.

Gender, Sexuality, & Jazz

The 1970s and 1980s are an essential moment for jazzwomen because this period saw the start of the first women's jazz festivals, the first books and publications on women in jazz, and a growth in community building amongst jazzwomen. The exclusion of this period from jazz scholarship more broadly perpetuates the canonical and patriarchal understanding that jazz was and is developed by men.⁷ This thesis relies on scholars whose work has been foundational to the

⁷ Scholars such as John Gennari and Eric Porter have critiqued jazz historiography and journalism for being patriarchal, white centric, and canonical, which result in histories that exclude women, marginalized communities, and any jazz that does not fit within normative jazz standards. John Gennari, *Blowin' Hot and Cool: Jazz and Its Critics* (University of Chicago Press, 2006); Eric Porter, "Incorporation and Distinction in Jazz History and Jazz

growing field of gender, sexuality and jazz including Sherrie Tucker, Linda Dahl, Sally Placksin, Tammy Kernodle, Kimberley Hannon Teal, Daphne A. Brooks, Nicole T. Rustin, Farah Jasmine Griffin, Kelsey Klotz, Christi J. Wells, Lisa Barg, Carolyn Glenn Brewer, and Linda F. Williams.⁸

Much of the scholarship in the area of gender, sexuality and jazz focuses on the intersectional identities of musicians through the lens of feminism, queerness, sexuality, and gender identity. Sherrie Tucker's scholarship covers various topics within gender, sexuality and jazz including histories on the all-girl swing bands of the 1940s, jazzwomen's musical networks and communities, and discourses on sexuality, straightness, queerness, and the label of "women in jazz." Further, her scholarship has developed many frameworks and methodologies that are essential to gender and jazz historiography.⁹ Tucker's chapter "When Subjects Don't Come Out"

Historiography" in *Jazz/Not Jazz: The Music and its Boundaries*, edited by David Ake, Charles Hiroshi Garrett, and Daniel Goldmark, (University of California Press, 2012).

⁸ Although this thesis does not directly utilize the scholarship of Sally Placksin, Linda Dahl, and D. Antoinette Handy, their books *American Women in Jazz: 1900 to Present* (1982), *The International Sweethearts of Rhythm: The Ladies Jazz Band from Piney Woods Country Life School* (1983), and *Stormy Weather: The Music and Lives of a Century of Jazz Women* (1989), represent the first three publications to provide comprehensive histories on women in jazz. Sally Placksin, *American Women in Jazz: 1900 to Present* (Wideview Books, 1982); D. Antoinette Handy, *The International Sweethearts of Rhythm: The Ladies Jazz Band from Piney Woods Country Life School* (Scarecrow Press, 1983); and Linda Dahl, *Stormy Weather: The Music and Lives of a Century of Jazz Women* (Limelight Editions, 1989). Other scholars mentioned and important scholarship in the field: Tammy L. Kernodle, "Black Women Working Together: Jazz, Gender, and the Politics of Validation," *Black Music Research Journal* 34, no. 1 (2014): 27–55; Christi J. Wells, "'A Dreadful Bit of Silliness': Feminine Frivolity and Ella Fitzgerald's Early Critical Reception," *Women and Music* 41 (2017): 43–65; Vanessa Blais-Tremblay, "'Where You Are Accepted, You Blossom': Toward Care Ethics in Jazz Historiography," *Jazz & Culture* 2 (2019): 59–83; Farah Jasmin Griffin, *If You Can't Be Free Be A Mystery: In Search Of Billie Holiday* (Random House, 2002); Lisa Barg, *Queer Arrangements: Billy Strayhorn and Midcentury Jazz Collaboration* (Wesleyan University Press, 2023).

⁹ Sherrie Tucker, "When Subjects Don't Come Out," in *Queer Episodes: In Music and Modern Identity*, edited by Sophie Fuller and Lloyd Whitesell (University of Illinois Press, 2002): 293–310; Sherrie Tucker, "When Did Jazz Go Straight?: A Queer Question For Jazz Studies," *Critical Studies in Improvisation* 4, no 2 (2008): 1–16; Sherrie Tucker, "Bordering on Community: Improvising Women Improvising Women-in-Jazz," in *The Other Side of Nowhere: Jazz, Improvisation, and Communities in Dialogue* (Wesleyan University Press, 2004): 244–267; Sherrie Tucker, "Deconstructing the Jazz Tradition: the Subjectless Subject of New Jazz Studies," in *Jazz/Not Jazz: The Music and its Boundaries*, edited by David Ake, Charles Hiroshi Garrett, and David Goldmark (University of California Press, 2012): 264–284; Tucker, *Swing Shift*; Nichole T. Rustin, and Sherrie Tucker, *Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies* (Duke University Press, 2008).

from *Queer Episodes: In Music and Modern Identity* and article “When Did Jazz Go Straight?: A Queer Question For Jazz Studies” from *Critical Studies in Improvisation*, analyze the issue of straightness and queerness in jazz studies, specifically asking scholars to reevaluate the weight sexuality has played in past jazz discourses. Tucker’s methodologies surrounding sexuality, straightness, passing, and the closet are essential to this thesis given the Lesbian-Separatist roots of women’s music. Although women’s music presented a sexually liberating space for women, as Tucker argues with the histories of all-girl swing bands, this thesis, like Tucker’s work, will not be working to “uncover” the queer identities of jazzwomen. Throughout this thesis I only identify musicians as queer if they were publicly out, more often referring to individuals as nonnormative to encompass their intersectional and marginalized identities. My use of nonnormative, particularly in chapter 1, is in reference to Cathy J. Cohen’s article “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?”¹⁰ In this article, Cohen argues that the then current idea of queer politics simply reinforces the binary of heterosexual and homosexual. Cohen argues that a truly radical queer politics, and queer identification, is “a politics where the *nonnormative* and *marginal* positions of punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queens, for example, is the basis for progressive transformative coalition work.” Nonnormative works to embody both the queer identities of musicians, but also their marginalized identities as women, and for some of the musicians, as Black women.

On a macro scale, this thesis demonstrates how jazz feminism, a term coined by jazz and gender scholar Nicole T. Rustin, can be applied to the activities of jazzwomen in the 1970s and 1980s. In her article “Jazz Feminism is to *Soul* as Purple is to Lavender,” Rustin explains that jazz feminism can be identified as both an identity and praxis that exists from the intersection of

¹⁰ Cathy J. Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 3 (1997): 437-465, 438.

Black feminism and jazz culture which “engender[s] a model of justice that is restorative, generative, and inclusive.”¹¹ A jazz feminist “understands jazz as a music that reflects and responds to the social, political, and cultural contexts out of which it emerges and persists.”¹² Rustin frames jazz feminism as an emerging identity, but it can also be used as a framework for understanding the work of past jazzwomen. Framing the intersections of women’s music and jazzwomen’s communities as examples of jazz feminism allows these narratives to enter broader feminist, queer, and music discourses.

Although much of gender, sexuality and jazz scholarship focuses on the histories and experiences of jazzwomen, the role masculinity plays in jazz is also an essential aspect to the field. Rustin’s *The Kind of Man I Am: Jazzmasculinity and the World of Charles Mingus Jr* introduces the concept of jazzmasculinity, a fostering of emotional expressivity rooted in femininity, but expressed through masculine actions that are specifically founded in stereotypical presentations of Black masculinity.¹³ Through the life of Charles Mingus Jr., and the roles of his wife Celia Mingus and associates like Hazel Scott, Rustin explains how jazzmasculinity can be an analytical tool for understanding the way men and women engage with jazz and are represented in its history. Although I do not directly use Rustin’s framework of jazzmasculinity in this thesis, her analysis of the ways femininity and masculinity function within jazz spaces has contributed to my scholarly thinking.

Since jazz is a Black American music, scholarship that specifically identifies and analyzes the lives and intersectional experiences of Black women throughout jazz and American musical histories is integral to the field of gender, sexuality and jazz. Daphne A. Brook’s *Liner*

¹¹ Nicole T. Rustin, “Jazz Feminism is to *Soul* as Purple is to Lavender,” *Jazz & Culture* 5, no 1 (2022): 3.

¹² Rustin, “Jazz Feminism,” 4.

¹³ Nicole T. Rustin, *The Kind of Man I Am: Jazzmasculinity and the World of Charles Mingus Jr* (Wesleyan University Press, 2017).

Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound is a two-part history presenting new methodologies and frameworks for studying Black women music makers.¹⁴ *Liner Notes for the Revolution* utilizes density to represent the indelible role Black women's intellectual and cultural labor has played in the making and preserving of music. In her chapter "Sister, Can You Line It Out?": Zora Neale Hurston Notes the Sound," Brooks presents Zora Neale Hurston as a musician and ethnomusicologist through her role as an ethnographer for the WPA in the 1930s.¹⁵ Brooks devotes a section of the chapter to analyze the significance of automobiles during the 1930s and its role in Hurston's work traveling across the southern United States. Although not directly identified as a specific cohesive framework, Brooks's use of automobiles as an icon of Hurston's life contrasts the iconicity of trains in the Great Migration and jazz musical narratives. This framework, which I call Brooks's car theory, helps contextualize the nonlinear progression of many jazzwomen's musical and professional careers, especially Black jazzwomen, and has contributed to my contextual understanding of musician Mary Watkins throughout this thesis.

Linda F. Williams's chapter "Black Women, Jazz, and Feminism," from her co-edited book *Black Women and Music: More than the Blues*, describes a three-generation system for understanding the feminist experiences of Black women in jazz: Speaking Blackness, Speaking Feminist, and Speaking of Class.¹⁶ Williams explains how these frameworks align with different generations: musicians born before 1945, between 1945-1965, and 1965-1985.¹⁷ Williams's framework provides an important analytical tool for studying the intersectional identities and

¹⁴ Daphne A. Brooks, *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound* (Harvard University Press, 2021).

¹⁵ Brooks, *Liner Notes for the Revolution*, 150-155.

¹⁶ Eileen M. Hayes and Linda F. Williams, *Black Women and Music: More than the Blues* (University of Illinois Press, 2007).

¹⁷ Hayes and Williams, *Black Women and Music*, 120-121.

experiences of Black jazzwomen in contrast to white jazzwomen. Although not directly utilized, Williams's three-generation framework provides a different perspective on the varied lived experiences of jazzwomen throughout the twentieth century.

Recent scholarship on gender, sexuality and jazz has identified the ways in which jazz scholarship has primarily looked at jazz publications for evidence of jazz involvement and engagement; this research suggests that jazz scholarship should look at non-jazz publications for evidence of jazz engagement and participation. Musicologist Emmalouise St Amand's article "Not Yet a Women, Never a Jazzman: Listening for Jazz in Midcentury Girl Cultures" examines high school yearbooks and newspapers, and *Seventeen* and *Tan Confessions* magazines to document how midcentury girls were actively involved in playing, writing, and listening to jazz.¹⁸ St Amand's article is critical to my understanding of the necessity of non-jazz publications and spaces as locations for jazzwomen.¹⁹ I extend her approach by examining sources that covered women's music for their coverage of jazzwomen.

Women's Music Scholarship

The Women's Music Cultural Movement, a musical genre and cultural movement, started in the late 1960s growing out of Lesbian-Separatist communities. Lesbian-Separatism was a branch of radical feminism that believed women's liberation and equality could only be achieved with a complete—social, political, and sexual—separation from men. The Women's Music Cultural

¹⁸ Emmalouise St Amand, "Not Yet a Women, Never a Jazzman: Listening for Jazz in Midcentury Girl Cultures," *The Journal of Jazz Studies* 16, no 1 (2025): 13-38.

¹⁹ Also see Kari Lindquist's article "Women College Musicians Take on the World: Gender in Cold War Jazz Diplomacy and Collegiate Jazz Programs," which investigates the role women played in university jazz ensembles sent on U.S. State Department tours in the 1970s. Kari Lindquist, "Women College Musicians Take on the World: Gender in Cold War Jazz Diplomacy and Collegiate Jazz Programs," *The Journal of Jazz Studies* 16, no 1 (2025): 39-64.

Movement sparked the creation of a new musical genre, women-only music festivals, all-women record labels, and spaces of belonging, and is an essential element of queer and feminist histories. Scholarship written by Eileen M. Hayes, Boden Sandstrom, Bonnie J. Morris, and Dee Mosbacher is foundational to women's music history. Most scholarship on women's music focuses on women's music festivals, and less on the broader Women's Music Cultural Movement that encompasses a wide breath of women's music advancements.²⁰ Despite Women's Music's important role in feminist history, minimal scholarship has been produced documenting its history and relevance. Scholarship on Women's Music primarily focuses on the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival instead of the entire history of the movement/genre and has all been produced in the last 25 years. Eileen M. Hayes notes in the introduction of her book *Songs in Black and Lavender: Race, Sexual Politics, and Women's Music* that, "Women's music has been jettisoned to the margins of critical study by scholars of both feminism and black music, but for different reasons. Because of its ideological foundations in cultural feminism, purveyors of feminist theory have regarded women's music as the anteriority of feminist performativity."²¹

Bonnie J. Morris's *Eden Built By Eves* is one of the first pieces of public literature on Women's Music. Formatted as a collective narrative, which Morris calls a *herstory*, *Eden Built By Eves* documents the history and culture of women's music festivals, focusing on the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival (1976-2015).²² Boden Sandstrom's 2002 dissertation, "Performance, Ritual, and Negotiation of Identity in the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival," is an

²⁰ Eileen M. Hayes, *Songs in Black and Lavender: Race, Sexual Politics, and Women's Music* (University of Illinois Press, 2010), 3.

²¹ Hayes, *Songs in Black and Lavender*, 3.

²² A *herstory* emphasizes that it is a women's narrative, removing the "his" from history. Morris, *Eden Built By Eves*.

ethnographic study analyzing the social and cultural practices at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival.²³ Sandstrom's dissertation is one of the most cited texts on Women's Music.

Sandstrom's chapter "Women's Music: Passing the Legacy," from Gayle Kimball's book *Women's Culture in a New Era: A Feminist Revolution*, overviews the history of Women's Music from its origins to its status in the early 2000s.²⁴ Sandstrom highlights essential themes in Women's Music, such as Lesbian-Separatism, the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, and gender negotiations. Her chapter serves as one of the few compact public histories on Women's Music.

The most well-known text on Women's Music, *Radical Harmonies*, is a 2002 documentary directed by Dee Mosbacher and co-produced by Sandstrom.²⁵ The documentary weaves together festival videos, photographs, and a soundtrack of Women's Music to present a nostalgic and uplifting documentary that provides an overarching history of the Women's Music movement. *Radical Harmonies* has mostly received wide acclaim but also important criticism from foundational women's music and gender and jazz scholars. In 2004, women's music scholar Eileen M. Hayes published a review in *Ethnomusicology* praising the film's success while also highlighting some of the discrepancies in the film's narrative style that prevent a deeper analysis of controversies within the Women's Music Cultural Movement.²⁶ In 2005, Tucker published a review in *American Music* in 2005 criticizing the film for using an overly positivistic and nostalgic tone to erase any conflict, specifically conflicts regarding gender and

²³ Boden Sandstrom, "Performance, Ritual, and Negotiation of Identity in the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival," (PhD diss., University of Maryland, 2002),

²⁴ Boden Sandstrom, "Women's Music: Passing the Legacy," in *Women's Culture in a New Era: A Feminist Revolution*, edited by Gayle Kimball (The Scarecrow Press, 2005): 99-135

²⁵ Dee Mosbacher, *Radical Harmonies*, 2002: Women Vision. Film.

²⁶ Eileen M. Hayes, "Reviewed Works: Radical Harmonies by Dee Mosbacher, Margie Adam, June Millington and Boden Sandstrom," *Ethnomusicology* 48, no 2 (2004): 312-314.

race, like the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival's trans exclusionary policy.²⁷ Hayes and Tucker's reviews represent important discourse around the tendency for women's music scholarship to build romanticized narratives excluding negative and exclusionary histories.

Unlike other foundational texts on Women's Music, Hayes's scholarship focuses on the intersection of race and gender in women's music spaces. Her books *Black Women and Music: More than the Blues* and *Songs in Black and Lavender* are the first comprehensive histories that present and analyze the role Black women played in women's music communities.²⁸ In *Songs in Black and Lavender*, Hayes introduces the concept of flygirl demographics as a way of understanding the individual experiences of Black women in women's music.²⁹ Hayes explains that flygirl demographics represents the way Black women are often *the only one* at women's music festivals yet have also always been a constant presence in women's music spaces. This unique experience and identity of being the-only-one and a constant presence must be considered when studying women's music. This concept helps understand the ways women like Mary Watkins experienced women's music spaces in this thesis. In the introduction to *Black Women and Music*, Hayes explains the roots of the musicological and ethnomusicological study of Black women and how the chapters in *Black Women and Music* represent a type of new musicology for studying Black women in music. Hayes, like Brooks, argues that studying the intersection of race and gender is essential to music scholarship. Hayes's work looks at women's music from a perspective that is mostly absent from other women's music scholarship and inspired my historiographic approach in this thesis for investigating the intersections of women's music and jazzwomen spaces.

²⁷ Sherrie Tucker, "Reviewed Works: Radical Harmonies by Dee Mosbacher and Boden Sandstrom," *American Music* 23, no 1 (2005): 133-135.

²⁸ Hayes and Williams, *Black Women and Music*; Hayes, *Songs in Black and Lavender*.

²⁹ Hayes, *Songs in Black and Lavender*, 37.

Black Feminist Theory

Throughout this thesis, I focus on musician Mary Watkins and her involvement in both jazzwomen and women's music communities. Unlike many of the other musicians I analyze, Mary Watkins's intersectional identity as a Black lesbian plays an integral role in her lived experiences within both jazz and women's music spaces. The work of Black feminist scholars Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Angela Davis, Patricia Hill Collins, Kimberlé Crenshaw, the Combahee River Collective, Jennifer C. Nash, Tina M. Campt, and Robin D. G. Kelley have been essential to my methodological thinking throughout this thesis.³⁰ Additionally, Rustin's concept of jazz feminism, which I utilize in chapter one, is rooted in Black feminist ideologies and the lived experiences of Black women musicians.

Since the 1970s, with the formation of the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO), Black feminism has been recognized as a distinct strand of feminism and an essential and critical strand of feminist and queer theory.³¹ In 1974, the Combahee River Collective, a collective of Black lesbians in Boston, MA, released the Combahee River Collective Statement, a critical piece of Black feminist and Black queer writing. In the opening statement, the collective stated that they were "actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking." The Combahee River Collective's understanding of intersectional oppressions has become an essential framework of

³⁰ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Routledge, 2000); Jennifer C. Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality* (Duke University Press, 2019); Tina M. Campt, "The Visual Frequency of Black Life: Love, Labor, and the Practice of Refusal," *Social Text* 140 37, no 3 (2019): 25.

³¹ "Combahee River Collective Statement," Combahee River Collective, 1974.

Black feminist thinking, predating another critical Black feminist text, Kimberlé Crenshaw's 1989 "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics," which coined the term intersectionality.³² In chapter one, I connect the Combahee River Collective Statement's understanding of Black feminism as not a segregated struggle, but a combined struggle with Black men, as an essential aspect of Rustin's jazz feminism and the mixed-gendered status of women's jazz festivals. Scholar, activist, and poet Audre Lorde's 1984 collection of essays and speeches, *Sister Outsider*, is another piece of Black feminist literature which, like the Combahee River Collective Statement, identifies the many intersectional oppressions that affect Black women, especially queer Black women.³³ Both the collective and Lorde's writings have been integral to the ways I understand Watkins's identity within women's music and jazzwomen spaces as well as the way I approach my feminist and queer analyses.

The writings and theories of other Black feminist scholars in relation to Black feminist thinking and praxis have also been influential to my scholarly thinking throughout this thesis. bell hooks's *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* and "Theory as Liberatory Practice" inform my understanding of praxis and praxis-based scholarship.³⁴ In "Theory as Liberatory Practice," hooks explains that "When our lived experience of theorizing is fundamentally linked to processes of self-recovery, of collective liberation, no gap exists between theory and practice."³⁵ hooks's reflection on the roots of praxis and its process of self-recovery and collective liberation are integral to the ways I understand the broader goal of this

³² Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1 (1989): 139-167.

³³ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Crossing Press, 1984, 2007).

³⁴ bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Routledge, 2014).

³⁵ bell hooks, "Theory as Liberatory Practice," *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism* 4, no 1 (1991): 2.

thesis and the ways different women's music and jazzwomen spaces functioned. Black feminism is the most inclusive and productive branch of feminist theory and is important to the work of many gender, sexuality and jazz scholars such as Rustin and Tammy Kernodle.³⁶ Black feminist theory provides an important framework for understanding the role jazzwomen *of all races* play in jazz history because it is a Black American music.

Black feminism is also understood by scholars as an essential element of the Black radical tradition in the U.S. Robin D. G. Kelley's *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, overviews the history of Black radical movements in the U.S. to create a foundational understanding of what he calls the Black radical imagination.³⁷ Kelley explains how many Black radical movements "crashed against the rocks, wrecked by various internal and external forces, but they left behind at least some kind of vision, however fragmented or incomplete, of what they wanted their world to look like."³⁸ Kelley argues that Black radical movements, with all their successes and failures, represent the potentiality of Black dreams, and this collective struggle is what constitutes a Black Radical Imagination. Kelley devotes a chapter in *Freedom Dreams* to Black feminism explaining that "radical black feminism offers one of the most comprehensive visions of freedom I can think of, one that recognizes the deep interconnectedness of struggles around race, gender, sexuality, culture, class, and spirituality."³⁹ His understanding of Black feminism and a Black radical imagination play a role in my understanding of Watkins's music, as well as other jazzwomen. Many jazz musicians, such as Sun Ra and Max Roach, are part of Kelley's Black radical imagination, and by understanding

³⁶ Tammy L. Kernodle, "Black Women Working Together: Jazz, Gender, and the Politics of Validation," *Black Music Research Journal* 34, no 1 (2014): 27–55.

³⁷ Robin D.G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Beacon Press, 2002), 10.

³⁸ Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, 3–4.

³⁹ Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, 154.

Watkins and other jazzwomen as Black feminists and contributors to a Black radical imagination, their narratives can gain entrance into the canon of the Black radical tradition.

Queer Theory and Ephemera Studies

In this thesis, I highlight the importance of ephemera as a methodology to reframe jazz narratives. Ephemera is a term used to describe transient materials—cultural objects whose temporary status has previously been denied relevance in archives and historiography, such as festival programs, zines, buttons, gig flyers, etc. Historian Anne Garner notes how marginalized groups, such as Black and queer communities, often rely on ephemera as a means of archiving their histories.⁴⁰ The importance of ephemera in queer studies has been highlighted by foundational queer theorists José Esteban Muñoz, Ann Cvetkovich, and Sara Ahmed. Each scholar analyzes the role ephemera plays in archiving queer histories, how scholars can reorient their understanding of what constitutes an archive, and how the ephemeral nature of queer archives function.

Ann Cvetkovich's *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality and Lesbian Public Cultures* uses lesbian spaces as a framework for investigating feelings, such as trauma, that complicate queer historiography.⁴¹ Cvetkovich explains how queer archives are built from personal materials and saved ephemera which are typically donated as collections. These curated ephemeral collections are both physical and embodied archives because “the history of any archive is a history of space, which becomes the material measure and foundation of the

⁴⁰ Anne Garner, "State of the Discipline: Throwaway History: Towards a Historiography of Ephemera," *Book History* 24, no 1 (2021): 244-263.

⁴¹ Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Duke University Press, 2003).

archive's power and visibility as a form of public culture."⁴² Archives built from ephemera tell specific stories that act as evidence separate from the ephemera itself. Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* works to create an understanding of a queer phenomenology by considering "how objects that appear in phenomenological writing function as 'orientation devices.'"⁴³ Ahmed reworks the concept of orientation, as in sexual orientation, to suggest that the way one orients themselves toward a space, an object, a moment, etc. determines how one understands that space, object, moment, etc..

In his article "Ephemera as Evidence," José Muñoz challenges the academic belief that historical evidence must be physical and abide by rigorous standards created by institutions. Muñoz argues that queerness is

a possibility, a sense of self-knowing, a mode of sociality and relationality. Queerness is often transmitted covertly...Instead of being clearly available as visible evidence, queerness has instead existed as innuendo, gossip, fleeting moments, and performances that are meant to be interacted with by those within its epistemological sphere—while evaporating at the touch of those who would eliminate queer possibilities.⁴⁴

As Muñoz articulates, queerness exists *as* ephemera and *is* ephemeral. Objects and moments that cannot be easily preserved and recorded because of their subversive nature are the evidence of queer lives. In his later book *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, Muñoz analyzes the concept of queerness as futurity—that queer possibility from the past is emblematic of queer futurity.⁴⁵ Muñoz explains that "it is important to call on the past, to animate it, understanding that the past has a performative nature, which is to say that rather than being static and fixed, the past does things. It is in this very way that the past is performative."⁴⁶ Moments in

⁴² Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*, 245.

⁴³ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Duke University Press, 2006), 3.

⁴⁴ José Muñoz, "Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 8, no 2 (1996): 6.

⁴⁵ José Estaban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York University Press, 2009).

⁴⁶ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 27-28.

the past that are understood as queer represent a desire and hope for a different future, a manifestation of a past, present, and future, a queer futurity. Throughout this thesis I utilize Muñoz's understanding of the significance of physical queer ephemera, as well as the idea that moments in the past that are ephemeral, are not physical objects, can also represent queer futurity. These theories surrounding ephemera, queerness, and futurity are essential to my understanding of jazzwomen's ephemeral and recorded existence and how they are often found in women's music spaces, spaces that represent both a failure and success.⁴⁷

In this thesis, I direct Ahmed's queer phenomenology toward archives and ephemera, thinking about how jazz scholarship needs to reorient itself toward different musical spaces to "find" evidence of jazzwomen's careers. Since many jazzwomen did not record albums or were unable to access record labels, evidence of their involvement in jazz is, as Muñoz articulates, ephemeral and found in ephemera. As my chapters will explain, in certain situations jazzwomen's historical absence is further complicated by their queer identities. Cvetkovich's work helps to understand how jazz scholarship has not looked at certain spaces and archival collections because of its relationship to queerness, masculinity, and femininity. Ephemera, and the ephemeral, are integral to the methodologies and frameworks I use throughout this thesis.

Chapter Descriptions

Chapter one, "'Women Can't Play Jazz': The Kansas City Women's Jazz Festival and the Universal Jazz Coalition's Salute to Women in Jazz Festival" compares the first two women's jazz festivals within the broader context of women's music festivals. In this chapter, I analyze

⁴⁷ This idea of success and failure is in reference to Jack Halberstam's book *The Queer Art of Failure*. Halberstam argues that success for the queer community is actually the art of failing because even as a community that is marginalized and actively erased, they are expected to fit into hegemonic understandings of time and success, and to fail and negate that is in turn a success. Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Duke University Press, 2011).

the different feminist identities negotiated across women's jazz festivals and interrogate the difficulties of formulating narratives when ephemera and archival material are absent. After an overview of the women's music and women's jazz festivals, I focus on musicians Mary Watkins, Julie Homie, and Nydia "Liberty" Mata, and the ensembles Alive! and Deuce. Each of these musicians entered women's music and jazzwomen's spaces differently, but all equally participated in both festival spaces. By cross-referencing archival and ephemeral material, I was able to identify each artists participation in women's music and jazzwomen spaces. Next, I analyze the different feminist identities that existed in the two festival spaces, arguing that the lesbian-separatist and jazz feminist views of the two festivals have erased them from larger feminist narratives. Discussing the developments of these festival cultures will help contextualize the significance of women's jazz festivals, reveal the feminist backlashes the festivals sometimes received from feminist communities, and highlight the importance of these spaces for jazzwomen's careers.

Chapter two, "'Call It Jazz': The Recorded Footprint of Jazzwomen in Women's Music" provides a close analysis of the recorded works of jazzwomen Mary Watkins, Alive! and Deuce. In this chapter, I demonstrate how Olivia Records and Redwood Records created spaces for jazzwomen to build liberating musical careers and record music that can be understood as a queer genre of refusal. These jazzwomen were active in both the women's music and jazzwomen scenes and are examples of nonnormative jazzwomen who navigated multiple musical spaces. This chapter focuses on the sound recordings of Watkins, Alive!, and Deuce alongside archival materials and oral histories. The albums of these women are out of print and only circulated within women's music communities and required ephemeral material to track down and contextualize. Understanding the recorded works of jazzwomen within women's music spaces

will help re-evaluate jazz historiography's emphasis on recorded works, broaden the analytical understandings of what constitutes jazz, and break down genre restrictions that bar jazzwomen from the jazz canon.

Conclusion

Susan Sailow and Kim MacRae's submissions to the "Chords and Discord" section of *Down Beat* magazine, featured at the start of this introduction, directed readers' attention to *Down Beat*'s limited and patriarchal portrayal of women's involvement in jazz in the 1970s. Sailow and MacRae knew that jazzwomen were active participants in the jazz community and their submissions, "Male Dominance" and "Male chauvinism unveiled," indicated that *Down Beat* did not share the same views. Magazines like *Down Beat* have been primary sources in jazz historiography, meaning the narratives they built, ones where women did not exist, prevailed. The two case studies presented in this thesis demonstrate how ephemera is an essential tool for constructing narratives on jazzwomen's involvement throughout jazz history. Additionally, these case studies show how investigating other musical spaces and non-jazz publications for information on the involvement of jazzwomen is necessary for the reclamation of jazzwomen's narratives.

Chapter 1. “Women Can’t Play Jazz”: The Kansas City Women's Jazz Festival and the Universal Jazz Coalition's Salute to Women in Jazz Festival

In anticipation of the third annual Kansas City Women’s Jazz Festival in 1980, the festival released a ninety-two-page *Directory of Female Jazz Performers*.¹ The directory included a single page of quotable quotes from the 1978 and 1979 festivals. Unauthored and undated, the first quote reads, “A women’s jazz festival? Isn’t that sexist, discriminatory, and grossly restrictive? Not really, when one considers the bad time women jazz artists historically have had. One of the most worn-out cliches of American music is that ‘women can’t play jazz.’”² By the 1970s, a large cohort of seasoned jazzwomen such as Mary Lou Williams, Melba Liston, Toshiko Akiyoshi, and Marian McPartland had demonstrated that women could indeed play jazz. Additionally, the 1970s saw the rise of many young talented jazzwomen and the creation of all-women ensembles. Still, the worn-out but widely used cliché that “women can’t play jazz” continued to overshadow jazzwomen’s abilities, even at this festival.

In 1978, the first two all-women jazz festivals were established and held their inaugural events: the Kansas City Women’s Jazz Festival (or WJF) in Kansas City, MO, and the Universal Jazz Coalition’s (UJC) Salute to Women in Jazz Festival (or Salute to Women) in New York City. Founded by two white women, Carol Comer and Dianne Gregg, the WJF received a significant amount of media coverage and was formed with the support of jazz pianist Marian McPartland and jazz critic Leonard Feather. Salute to Women, founded by Cobi Narita, a

¹ “1980 Women’s Jazz Festival National Directory of Female Jazz Performers, Quotable Quotes, 90,” Dr. Leigh Pilzer’s Personal Collection of Jazzwomen Ephemera, College Park, MD.

² “1980 Women’s Jazz Festival National Directory of Female Jazz Performers, Quotable Quotes, 90,” Dr. Leigh Pilzer’s Personal Collection of Jazzwomen Ephemera, College Park, MD.

Japanese American woman, was part of the Universal Jazz Coalition's broader program to support local and early-career jazzwomen. With the second-wave feminist movement in full swing, both jazz festivals represented the changing social and political climate of the 1970s. Earlier in the 1970s, the lesbian-separatist movement sparked the creation of the Women's Music Cultural Movement and its formation of women's music festivals such as the National Women's Music Festival (or NWMF) and the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival (or MichFest). Despite the rise in feminist attitudes during the period and the formation of women's music festivals a few years prior to women's jazz festivals, the radical feminist environments formed at the women's music festivals differed vastly from the feminist ideals of women's jazz festivals. Neither the differences nor the intersections between these festivals have been studied.

In this chapter, I examine the first two women's jazz festivals, WJF and Salute to Women, within the broader context of women's music festivals in order to analyze the different feminist identities negotiated across women-centered music spaces in the 1970s and 1980s. Looking at the two spaces concurrently reveals a group of musicians who performed at, and participated in, both music festivals and scenes. After an overview of the most well-known women's music festivals, the National Women's Music Festival and the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, I introduce WJF and Salute to Women. Using archival and ephemeral materials, I detail the goals and political ideologies of each jazz festival. Then, I focus on Alive!, Mary Watkins, Julie Homie, Nadia "Liberty" Mata, and Deuce, all artists who appeared at both the women's music festivals and the women's jazz festivals. Looking at these specific musicians and their involvement in both festival scenes demonstrates how nonnormative jazzwomen navigated multiple music scenes in order to find musical success and acceptance.³ Afterwards, I analyze the

³ Cathy J. Cohen's "Punks, Bulldaggers and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?" *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 3 (1997): 437-465.

types of feminist strands that developed at the women's music and women's jazz festival demonstrating how both festivals' focus on marginalized communities excluded them from mainstream feminist narratives. Discussing the developments of these festival cultures contextualizes the significance of women's jazz festivals, reclaims the lost narratives of nonnormative jazzwomen, and highlights the importance of studying non-jazz spaces in jazz history.

Women's Music Festivals

The most well-known text on women's music, the 2002 documentary *Radical Harmonies*, weaves together festival videos, photographs, and a soundtrack of women's music to provide an overarching history of the Women's Music Cultural Movement.⁴ One of the opening lines offers a wide-ranging definition of women's music: "Women's Music is inclusive of all the different things that affect us, and lesbians just have the courage to name it."⁵ Forming in the 1970s out of the lesbian-separatist movement, ethnomusicologist and producer Boden Sandstrom describes women's music as a musical genre that is "women-identified: written by, about, and specifically for women."⁶ The genre and movement sparked the creation of all-women music festivals, record labels, production companies, and spaces of belonging and the movement is an essential element of queer and feminist histories. Because the movement centered and celebrated womanhood, women who experienced sexism and homophobia in other musical genres found solace in women's music. In *Eden Built By Eves*, one of the first published texts on women's music, women's music scholar Bonnie J. Morris explains how "Collectively, these women who

⁴ Dee Mosbacher, *Radical Harmonies*, 2002: Women Vision. Film.

⁵ Mosbacher, *Radical Harmonies*.

⁶ Boden Sandstrom, "Performance, Ritual, and Negotiation of Identity in the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival," (PhD diss., University of Maryland, 2002), 2.

envisioned ongoing, safe, private, and inspiring performance spaces for women's music and culture built institutions known as women's music festivals."⁷ The Women's Music Cultural Movement became most famous for its music festivals, which were entirely run by women and acted as central points for the long-term sustainability of women's music.

On May 28th, 1974, the first all-women music festival, the National Women's Music Festival (NWMF), was held in Champaign, Illinois.⁸ A six-day festival, the inaugural NWMF hosted workshops on topics such as audio engineering, broadcasting, arranging commercials, and the sociology of rock; performances by women music artists Cassie Culver and Meg Christian; showings of the Roberta Flack documentary; and many more women—and lesbian—centered events.⁹ Over the years, the NWMF expanded the workshop themes to include workshops on improvisatory theater, women in conducting, music education, music therapy, basic jazz theory, and even lute and classical guitar.¹⁰ The NWMF became a symbol of women's strength and collaboration, and was an example for dozens of other women's music festivals that developed throughout the 1970s.

A few years later in 1976, the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival (or MichFest), one of the most famous women's music festivals, held its inaugural event.¹¹ Similar to the NWMF, MichFest hosted various music-based workshops, discussions, and concerts. MichFest was more remote than the NWMF and required an immense amount of physical labor to set-up and run throughout the multi-day festival. MichFest, along with NWMF, established a matriarchal

⁷ Bonnie J. Morris, *Eden Built By Eves: The Culture of Women's Music Festivals* (Alyson Books, 1999), 4.

⁸ "NWMF 1st Festival Program", Box 10, 1st-4th NWMF, 1974-1977, Women's Music Archive records and collected music, Sophia Smith Collection of Women's History, Smith College Special Collections, Northampton, MA.

⁹ "NWMF 1st Festival Program", Box 10, 1st-4th NWMF, 1974-1977, Women's Music Archive records and collected music, Sophia Smith Collection of Women's History, Smith College Special Collections, Northampton, MA.

¹⁰ "NWMF 1st Festival Program" and "NWMF 2nd Festival Program," Box 10, 1st-4th NWMF, 1974-1977, Women's Music Archive records and collected music, Sophia Smith Collection of Women's History, Smith College Special Collections, Northampton, MA.

¹¹ Sandstrom, "Performance, Ritual, and Negotiation of Identity," 1 & 293.

system at the festivals, which attempted to create an environment that empowered women. For example, to prevent the need to hire men, the women attending the festival were required to volunteer at least once throughout the festival's run. Morris explained how this included "child care, backstage security, garbage removal, massage, lost and found, sign-language interpretation, and of course, the kitchen."¹² The women's music festivals were not perfect utopias, but many of the conversations and problems that unfolded at the festivals reflected the intersectional identities of the festival attendees and performers.¹³ Women's music festivals were likely the first festivals to offer childcare, ASL interpreters, identity-specific tents, and accessibility for disabled attendees— they became spaces where marginalized identities could be celebrated.¹⁴

Women's Jazz Festivals

In *Stormy Weather*, one of the first texts on jazzwomen, scholar Linda Dahl explains that "the assumption about women in jazz was that there weren't any, because jazz was by definition a male music. Therefore, women could not play it. Therefore, they did not do so. When confronted by women who belied the assumptions, women who competently played trumpets, saxophones, drums, a deaf ear was turned."¹⁵ How does one turn the spotlight on jazzwomen, so no deaf ears are turned? In the spring of 1978, independent from the women's music festivals,

¹² Morris, *Eden Built By Eves*, 62.

¹³ Although these music festivals have frequently been painted as women's utopias, the women's music festivals were not without their conflict. There were often internal communication strife and issues regarding diversity and attendance policies, such as the widely known establishment of Camp Trans by Leslie Feinberg in 1994 outside of MichFest in response to their woman-born-only policy. Morris, *Eden Built by Eves*, 152; Sarah Cooper, "Tracing womyn-born-womyn & trans-exclusion: Into the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival archive," *Journal of Lesbian Studies* (May 16, 2024); Elizabeth Currans, "Transgender Women Belong Here: Contested Feminist Visions at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival," *Feminist Studies* 46, no 2 (2020): 459-488.

¹⁴ MichFest created the Disabled Area Resources Team (DART) which helped make the festival and festival grounds more accessible for festgoers. Teresa Weems, an ASL interpreter at the festival, recalled in *Radical Harmonies* that "I'd never been in an environment where a production company changed policy to take care of the audience." Mosbacher, *Radical Harmonies*.

¹⁵ Linda Dahl, *Stormy Weather: The Music and Lives of a Century of Jazzwomen* (Limelight Editions, 1984), xi.

the first two women's jazz festivals held their inaugural events: The Kansas City Women's Jazz Festival (WJF) and the Universal Jazz Coalition's Salute to Women in Jazz Festival in New York City. Located in historically significant jazz cities, both festivals formed with the intent to provide spaces for community building, networking, and education; performance opportunities for successful and up-and-coming jazzwomen; and a platform to uplift jazzwomen's contributions. The start of WJF and Salute to Women marked a pivotal moment in jazz history, a period in which jazzwomen began to build more community around their collective struggles. The high density of jazzwomen who performed, taught, showed off their skills, and even kick started their careers at the women's jazz festivals worked to prove that all ears should be turned to them.

Carolyn Glenn Brewer's *Changing the Tune: The Kansas City Women's Jazz Festival, 1978-1985* provides a comprehensive overview of WJF.¹⁶ *Changing the Tune* is the first book written about women's jazz festivals and is primarily based on interviews and ephemeral research. It focuses on the history of the festival, offering a narrative of each festival year. Brewer's book is necessary in understanding how WJF was established, the environment of the festival, and how the festival ended. The following section will build on Brewer's work, extending the historical framework of the festival, and engaging and analyzing WJF's role in broader jazzwomen history. I originally learned about Cobi Narita, the UJC, and the Salute festival via a brief mention in *Changing the Tune*. I acquired most of the information on Salute via ephemera found in women's music archives; little information exists on the UJC and Salute festivals outside of ephemeral sources.

¹⁶ Carolyn Glenn Brewer, *Changing the Tune: The Kansas City Women's Jazz Festival, 1978-1985* (University of North Texas Press, 2017).

From the beginning, Comer and Gregg created WJF to function as both a jazz festival and a nonprofit dedicated to uplifting jazzwomen's careers. WJF's goals were written in the first festival program: "to create a market for the increasing number of female jazz artists, and to stimulate an interest in jazz in general. These accomplishments will be achieved by our continuing sponsorship of concerts, clinics, workshops, scholarships, and competitions."¹⁷ During its inaugural year, WJF instituted a \$500 scholarship award for high school and college students. The following year, WJF developed a combo contest, with the first winners set to perform at the 1979 festival. The contest was not limited to all-women groups but did require that the combo center women. Despite these inclusive rules, only one of WJF's combo winners included men and the combo contest became an important platform for many up-and-coming all-women ensembles such as Aerial (1979), Quintess (1980), Sojourner (1981), Bougainvillea (1982), Joyspring (1983), and Deuce (1985).¹⁸ The combo contest winners were billed on the same performance as WJF's Top New Talent (TNT) concert, which was added to the festival in 1980. In the program, WJF explained that

There are a number of gifted women jazz artists in the world, many of whom are involved in a constant struggle for greater recognition and respect. There are limited opportunities for them to be heard, not only by the mass media but by the jazz aficionado (whose support is crucial to a successful career).¹⁹

¹⁷ "International Premiere Concert, Women's Jazz Festival," Women's Music Festivals, 1977-1987, Folder 15, Box 16, Leonard Feather Collection, International Jazz Collections, University of Idaho, Moscow, Idaho.

¹⁸ Many of these ensembles performed at the Salute to Women festival, as well as later women's jazz festivals. "International Premiere Concert, Women's Jazz Festival," "Jazzwomen '79," "Jazzwomen '80," "Fourth Annual Women's Jazz Festival," "Jazzwomen '82," '83 Jazzwomen," Women's Music Festivals, 1977-1987, Folder 15, Box 16, Leonard Feather Collection, International Jazz Collections, University of Idaho, Moscow, Idaho. WJF Programs from Leonard Feather Papers and WMA Women's Jazz Festival box; "Women's Jazz Festival, March 11, 1984," Deuce, Box 3, Women's Music Archive records and collected music, Sophia Smith Collection of Women's History, Smith College Special Collections, Northampton, MA.

¹⁹ "Jazzwomen '80, 3rd Annual Women's Jazz Festival," Women's Music Festivals, 1977-1987, Folder 15, Box 16, Leonard Feather Collection, International Jazz Collections, University of Idaho, Moscow, Idaho. 3rd WJF Program from Leonard Feather papers.

The TNT concert was one of WJF's biggest successes and provided a stage for many lesser-known jazzwomen, including vocalist Dianne Reeves, pianist Mary Watkins, the Bonnie Janofsky-Ann Patterson Big Band (later known as the Maiden Voyage Big Band), the all-women ensemble Alive!, vocalist Sheila Jordan, and the women's music ensemble Sweet Honey in the Rock.²⁰

The Universal Jazz Coalition's Salute to Women in Jazz Festival, which opened in June 1978, had similar goals to WJF. The Salute festival was hosted by the Universal Jazz Coalition, a local "service organization concerned with assisting emerging jazz artists" and amateur musicians through workshops, concerts, and professional events.²¹ Cobi Narita, UJC's founder, explained in a *Jazz Times* interview with journalist Sylvia Levine that, "Women were so underrepresented at the jazz festivals I felt it was time to do something. We had music, workshops, jam sessions, all kinds of events, sometimes outdoors in Damrosch Park."²² Much of the UJC's funding was provided through grants and fundraising, and Narita often used her own money when funding fell short.²³ After its first year, Salute received support from George Wein, the director of the Newport Jazz Festival. During the festival's inaugural summer, one of its venues shut the festival out over revenue disagreements and Wein offered Carnegie Recital Hall for the rest of the festival's run.²⁴ For the first two years, Salute ran at the same time as the

²⁰ "International Premiere Concert, Women's Jazz Festival," "Jazzwomen '79," "Jazzwomen '80," "Fourth Annual Women's Jazz Festival," "Jazzwomen '82," '83 Jazzwomen," Women's Music Festivals, 1977-1987, Folder 15, Box 16, Leonard Feather Collection, International Jazz Collections, University of Idaho, Moscow, Idaho.

²¹ Cathy Lee, "A Salute to Women in Jazz," *Paid Our Dues* 3, no 4, (1979): 28-29.

²² Sylvia Levine Leitch, "Cobi Narita: A Special Place for Jazz," *JazzTimes* (November 8, 2011), <https://www.jazztimes.com/features/columns/cobi-narita-a-special-place-for-jazz/?v=0b3b97fa6688>.

²³ Lara Pellegrinelli interview, interview by Lael Dratfield, December 9, 2025, Zoom.

²⁴ Leitch, "Cobi Narita: A Special Place for Jazz;" John S. Wilson, "Second 'Salute to Women in Jazz' Set," *The New York Times*, June 24, 1979, 30.

Newport Jazz Festival, but by 1980, it ran a few weeks ahead of Newport so as not to cause competition between the musicians and festival attendees.²⁵

Interestingly, years before the festivals started, Wein had laughed at the idea of an all-women event, saying, “Oh, the idea of a women’s jazz festival is funny... We chuckled about that for a long time...”²⁶ Around 1976-1977, Marian McPartland approached Wein about having a specific jazzwomen specific event at the Newport Jazz Festival. In an interview with Wayne Enstice, Paul Rubin, and Janis Stockhouse, McPartland explained that “I went to George Wein and asked him about having a women’s group in the Jazz Festival, but he said, ‘Oh, come on, Marian, you know there aren’t enough good women players to do that.’ Of course, that gave me the incentive to prove him wrong. I love a challenge.”²⁷ In 1977, when Comer and Gregg called McPartland about starting WJF, McPartland was immediately on board. It is unclear what changed Wein’s mind when he offered Carnegie Hall for Narita’s Salute in 1978, but he seemed to be having some change of heart because in 1981, Rosetta Reitz convinced Wein to program a two-part feature on women in jazz entitled “Blues Is a Woman.”²⁸

Many of the women who performed at Salute to Women were local New York City players, which reflected Narita and UJC’s goal to support its local music community. The first festival featured Ruth Brisbane, Janet Lawson, Sheila Jordan, Diane Green, Barbara Merjan, Sharon Freeman, and Janice Robinson.²⁹ Similar to WJF, Salute was a mixed gender festival and

²⁵ John S. Wilson, “3rd Women’s Jazz Salute Opens Today,” *The New York Times*, June 1st, 1980, 51.

²⁶ Dahl, *Stormy Weather*, 191.

²⁷ “McPartland, Marian, November 24, 1996,” Box 6, Folder 11, Enstice, Rubin, and Stockhouse Jazz Interviews and Radio Show Audiovisual Recordings (IJS), Institute of Jazz Studies, Rutgers University, Newark, New Jersey, 30.

²⁸ Considering the success of WJF and Salute, and Wein’s apparent change in perspective regarding jazzwomen, the Newport Jazz Festival did not make much progress in its programming of women. The DIVA Jazz orchestra, an all-women big band started by Sherrie Miracle in 1992, did not perform at the Newport Jazz Festival until 2017, during their 25th anniversary tour. (I attended this performance and remember comments from Miracle about how this was DIVA’s first time playing at Newport). Sheree Crute, “Jazz: We Didn’t Always Sing the Moaning/Groaning Blues,” *Ms. Magazine* (July 1981): 19.

²⁹ John S. Wilson, “Six Groups Start off the Salute to Women in Jazz,” *The New York Times*, June 28, 1978, C19.

many of the headliners' supporting musicians were men. Also, like WJF, Salute to Women set up scholarship and grant opportunities for jazzwomen. In 1979, the festival hosted a competition in which the winner was "provided a scholarship to the Berklee College of Music."³⁰ That same year, prior to the competition and festival, Narita received a \$5000 grant to bring an all-women big band to WJF.³¹ The UJC's Big Apple Women in Jazz included professional and amateur jazzwomen; the band traveled to the 1979 WJF festival, and later performed at the 1979 Salute to Women festival.³² Although UJC's Big Apple Women in Jazz was not scheduled on the main concert or TNT bill at WJF, the performance gave Salute to Women, UJC, and the jazzwomen performing a spotlight. This connection between WJF and Salute to Women demonstrates how the WJF and Salute often acted in tandem as launching sites for many jazzwomen. Likewise, Aerial, the 1979 WJF combo contest winners, originally met at the inaugural Salute to Women festival and most of Aerial's members were part of the WJF Big Apple performance.³³ Jean Fineberg, who performed with Big Apple as well, later formed the duo Deuce with Ellen Seeling. They performed at the third annual Salute festival in 1980 and were the combo contest winners at the final WJF in 1985.³⁴

It was relatively common for jazzwomen to perform at both the WJF and Salute festivals, with most artists performing first at Salute before moving on to WJF. Additionally, many of the up-and-coming jazzwomen, such as Mary Watkins, Sojourner, and Alive!, as well as jazzwomen giants such as Melba Liston and Toshiko Akiyoshi, went on to perform at other small women's

³⁰ Jon Saunders, "Jazz Salute to Women.... Part 1" *New York Amsterdam News*, July 21, 1979, 35.

³¹ Leitch, "Cobi Narita: A Special Place for Jazz."

³² Saunders, "Jazz Salute to Women.... Part 1," 35.

³³ Because of both Salute and WJF, Aerial became the first all-women group to perform at the Newport Jazz Festival in 1979. Carolyn Glenn Brewer, *Changing the Tune: The Kansas City Women's Jazz Festival, 1978-1985* (University of North Texas Press, 2017), 73-74 & 76.

³⁴ "New York's Third Annual Women's Jazz Festival," and "Women's Jazz Festival, March 11, 1984," Deuce, Box 3, Women's Music Archive records and collected music, Sophia Smith Collection of Women's History, Smith College Special Collections, Northampton, MA.

jazz festivals that emerged during the period, including a women's jazz weekend at Lulu White's in Boston in 1980 and From Bessie to Billie to Now: A Festival of Women Jazz Artists in Chicago in 1981.³⁵

		Musicians and Ensembles								
		Mary Watkins	Deuce	Alive!	Julie Homi	Nydia "Liberty" Mata	Melba Liston	Toshiko Akiyoshi	Sojourner	Aerial
Women's Jazz Festivals	WJF									
	Salute to Women									
	Lulu Whites									
	From Bessie to Billie to Now									
Women's Music Festivals	NWMF									
	MichFest									

Figure 1.1 Organizational chart representing some of the crossover in artists between women's music festivals and women's jazz festivals.³⁶

For some of these jazzwomen, WJF and Salute to Women were not their first time experiencing a women-centered festival space. Figure 1 charts the jazzwomen I focus on and the festivals at which they appeared. Alive! and Mary Watkins were already popular names within women's music circuits before performing at the women's jazz festivals. Alive!, an all-women

³⁵ "From Bessie to Billie to Now," Women's Jazz Festivals, 1980-1986, 1996, Box 12, Women's Music Archive records and collected music, Sophia Smith Collection of Women's History, Smith College Special Collections, Northampton, MA.

³⁶ The information in this chart was found across archival sources. See Archival Collections section of the bibliography.

jazz quintet, had its start in women's music and is often credited as helping to bring jazz to the women's music festivals. The ensemble first performed at the National Women's Music Festival in 1977 and continued to perform and teach jazz workshops at the festival through 1985.³⁷ Mary Watkins, a Howard University alumnus in classical composition, gigged in the D.C. jazz scene before moving to the Bay Area and becoming a central figure in the women's music community.³⁸ Watkins first performed at NWMF in 1980, the same year she performed at WJF. Some artists, such as Ellen Seeling and Jean Fineberg of Deuce, simultaneously established themselves within jazz and women's music spaces, performing at Salute, WJF, NWMF and the Michigan Women's Music Festival. Pianists Julie Homi, who performed as a solo artist and Deuce's pianist, frequently performed at the Salute festival and as a performer and workshop presenter at NWMF and MichFest.³⁹ Similarly, percussionist Nydia "Liberty" Mata who performed with Deuce at the Salute festivals, as well as in the all-women Latin group Latin Fever, which Seeling and Fineberg were also a part of, participated in MichFest.⁴⁰ In addition to performing at both festival spaces, Alive!, Watkins, and Deuce primarily recorded with women's music record labels, something I focus on in chapter two, and although the albums were primarily circulated in the women's music community, advertisements for their records appear in the WJF festival programs.⁴¹ Alive!, Watkins, Homi, Mata, and Deuce found community in both

³⁷ I only looked at NWMF programs through the 11th NWMF but based on an interview with Rhiannon of Alive!, the ensemble disbanded around this time. Rhiannon, interview by Lael Dratfield, December 8th, 2025, Zoom.

³⁸ "Artist Biography MARY WATKINS," Mary Watkins, Box 7, Women's Music Archive records and collected music, Sophia Smith Collection of Women's History, Smith College Special Collections, Northampton, MA.

³⁹ Dahl, *Stormy Weather*, 187.

⁴⁰ I do not identify whether Homi and Mata performed at WJF since I have been unable to locate the 1985 WJF program. Considering how frequently Homi and Mata played at Salute, individually and with Deuce, they likely performed with Deuce in 1985 at WJF. "Michigan Womyn's Music Festival 1983," Festival programs, 1983, 1991-2002, Box 1, Michigan Womyn's Music Festival records, Sophia Smith Collection of Women's History, Smith College Special Collections, Smith College, Northampton, MA; Dahl, *Stormy Weather*, 184.

⁴¹ Both Homi and Mata are credited on Deuce's 1986 album *Deuce*. "Jazzwomen '80," "Jazzwomen '80, 3rd Annual Women's Jazz Festival," Women's Music Festivals, 1977-1987, Folder 15, Box 16, Leonard Feather Collection, International Jazz Collections, University of Idaho, Moscow, Idaho. Deuce, *Deuce*, Redwood Records, 1986, LP.

women's music and jazzwomen spaces, but because they were nonnormative, never fully found acceptance within broader jazz communities and have mostly been erased from jazz narratives.⁴²

Feminist Identity

Although the focus of both jazz festivals was to uplift jazzwomen, neither festival fundamentally identified as feminist. WJF was primarily run by women with founders Dianne Gregg and Carol Comer as the acting president and executive director, along with vice-president Ann Monaco, secretary Maggie Weed, and treasurer Debbie Williams.⁴³ Similarly, UJC and Salute to Women were run by Cobi Narita, and at times the UJC board included Betty Carter, Melba Liston, Mary Lou Williams, and Abbey Lincoln.⁴⁴ Despite having mostly women leaders, neither women's jazz festival had the intention of excluding men from any aspect of the festivals; this distinguished them from the women's music festivals, which explicitly created women-only spaces. In an interview with the *Kansas City Star* in 1977, WJF founder Dianne Gregg specifically noted that, "We don't want to be misunderstood, though I'd like to stress that it's not a feminist organization. Because it is a nonprofit group, we can't be political."⁴⁵ Later in an interview with scholar Linda Dahl, WJF founder Carol Comer explained that "We always say that one of our goals is that we want to become obsolete. We *want* to go out of business! Ultimately, women should be just as integral a part of the jazz music scene as they are becoming in any other field or occupation."⁴⁶ Similarly, in a New York Times article released prior to the

⁴² I understand a nonnormative jazzwomen to be an individual whose queer identity or atypical jazz style alienated them from jazz communities. Some of nonnormative jazzwomen women identified as lesbians, but some never came out, but their perceived queerness othered them in addition to their gender.

⁴³ "International Premiere Concert, Women's Jazz Festival," Women's Music Festivals, 1977-1987, Folder 15, Box 16, Leonard Feather Collection, International Jazz Collections, University of Idaho, Moscow, Idaho.

⁴⁴ Leitch, "Cobi Narita: A Special Place for Jazz."

⁴⁵ Brewer, *Changing the Tune*, 25.

⁴⁶ Dahl, *Stormy Weather*, 192.

inaugural Salute to Women festival Narita explained that “she was not advocating” for a women-only event but that, “This is a salute to women artists, an opportunity to show that women are artists and should be treated as artists.”⁴⁷ For Gregg, Comer, and Narita, this meant festivals that were not gender segregated. This, of course, created some issues throughout WJF’s run. During the 1978 festival, a group of feminists, upset by the inclusion of men, came to protest outside the Sunday concert.⁴⁸ Likewise, there was dissatisfaction following the 1979 festival over the same boy winning the \$500 scholarship two years in a row, as well as men dominating the evening jam sessions, alienating women from the space.⁴⁹

These minor details represent some of the stark differences in the feminist ideals of jazzwomen and women’s music spaces. On one end, the Women’s Music Cultural Movement advocated for a radical feminist ideology, where women-only festivals were seen as the best path toward creating positive and inclusive spaces for women. On the other end, women’s jazz festivals denied feminist labels, arguing that an equitable jazz future required the integration and acceptance of jazzwomen into the broader jazz community (indeed, WJF legally could not limit their contests and scholarships to women). The contrasting feminist positions of these festival spaces may seem unusual considering the ways second-wave feminism paints an image of a somewhat unified feminism, or what feminist scholar Chela Sandoval describes as a “hegemonic feminism.”⁵⁰ But the distinct feminist ideologies that formed at women’s music and women’s

⁴⁷ John S. Wilson, “A Salute to Women in Jazz Will Open,” *The New York Times*, June 25, 1978, 39.

⁴⁸ Brewer, *Changing the Tune*, 56.

⁴⁹ Brewer, *Changing the Tune*, 92-95.

⁵⁰ Although I have used the phrase “second-wave feminism” throughout this paper to indicate a specific period, the concept is misrepresentative of feminism from the 1970s and 1980s. Calling on scholar Chela Sandoval’s term “hegemonic feminism,” scholar Becky Thompson explains that “This feminism is white-led, marginalizes the activism and worldviews of women of color, focuses mainly on the United States, and treats sexism as the ultimate oppression. Hegemonic feminism deemphasizes or ignores class and race analysis, generally sees equality with men as the goal of feminism, and has an individual rights-based rather than justice-based vision for social change.” Becky Thompson, “Multiracial Feminism: Recasting the Chronology of Second Wave Feminism,” in *No Permanent Waves: Recasting Histories of U.S. Feminism*, edited by Nancy A. Hewitt (Rutgers University Press, 2010), 39.

jazz festivals more accurately represent the diverse and nuanced feminist identities of the second-wave period. The radical lesbian-separatism of the Women's Music Cultural Movement and the denied feminism of women's jazz festivals are both often left out of a second-wave feminist narratives because of their inclusion of marginalized and nonnormative communities.

Jazz Feminism

Although both WJF and Salute denied being feminist oriented festivals, it is evident that they strove to create environments that uplifted and improved the lives of jazzwomen; further, because both festivals fore fronted jazz—a Black American music—these festivals developed differently than the women's music festivals. WJF and Salute can be understood as spaces that practice what scholar Nicole T. Rustin calls *jazz feminism*. In her article “Jazz Feminism is to *Soul* as Purple is to Lavender,” Rustin explains that jazz feminism can be understood as a “model of justice that is restorative, generative, and inclusive.”⁵¹ Rustin uses the Pixar movie *Soul* as a starting point because the movie “asks us to imagine a jazz world in which women are visible, integrated and central, aligning women's stories with men's rather than making them exceptional.”⁵² WJF and Salute understood that creating women-only festivals would further alienate women from male-dominant jazz spaces and perpetuate ideas of individual exceptionalism.⁵³ To create gender equity within jazz spaces meant collectively celebrating jazzwomen alongside jazzmen. This collective element is directly connected to Black feminist

⁵¹ Nicole T. Rustin, “Jazz Feminism is to *Soul* as Purple is to Lavender,” *Jazz & Culture* 5, no 1 (Spring/Summer 2022), 3.

⁵² Rustin, “Jazz Feminism,” 3.

⁵³ For more on individual exceptionalism and jazzwomen see: Kimberley Hannon Teal, “Mary Lou Williams as Apology: Jazz, History, and Institutional Sexism in the Twenty-First Century,” *Jazz and Culture* 2 (2019): 1-26; Kimberley Hannon Teal, “Posthumously Live: Canon Formation at Jazz at Lincoln Center through the Case of Mary Lou Williams,” *American Music* 32, no 4 (2012): 400-422.

ideologies, which Rustin explains is an essential aspect of jazz feminism. In 1973, the Combahee River Collective, an important Black feminist collective, wrote that

Although we are feminists and Lesbians, we feel solidarity with progressive Black men and do not advocate the fractionalization that white women who are separatists demand... We struggle together with Black men against racism, while we also struggle with Black men about sexism.⁵⁴

Even before it was solidified as a distinct strand of feminism in the 1970s, Black feminism has typically been inclusive to the struggles of all and advocated for collaboration and integration, not separation. Black feminist and lesbian-separatist ideologies do not always align, which explains some of the backlash the women's jazz festivals received from certain feminist groups.⁵⁵ However, the jazz feminism that developed at women's jazz festivals reflected the racial and gendered history of jazz— and this feminist history was not ignored by the women's music community.

The vastly different cultures of the Women's Music Cultural Movement and jazz communities have led to an assumption that these spaces did not intersect—but they did. Even though the feminist environments of women's jazz festivals were vastly different to women's music festivals, the women's music community took note of the progress jazzwomen were making during the period. The feminist music journal *Paid My Dues: A Quarterly Journal of Women and Music*, which printed from 1974 to 1980, wrote about jazzwomen and the women's jazz festivals more frequently and comprehensively than jazz magazines like *Down Beat*. *Paid My Dues* journalist and musician Susan Abod began a column titled “And All That Jazz” in the Autumn 1977 volume, which appeared in every issue through 1979.⁵⁶ After the start of Abod's

⁵⁴ Combahee River Collective Statement, 1973.

⁵⁵ Brewer does not describe what type of feminist group protested outside of the inaugural WJF.

⁵⁶ Susan Abod, “And All That Jazz,” *Paid My Dues* 2, no 1 (Fall 1977); Susan Abod, “And All That Jazz,” *Paid My Dues* 2, no 2 (Winter 1978); Susan Abod, “And All That Jazz,” *Paid My Dues* 2, no 3 (Spring 1978); Susan Abod, “And All That Jazz,” *Paid My Dues* 2, no 4 (Summer 1978); Susan Abod, “And All That Jazz,” *Paid My Dues* 3, no

column, *Paid My Dues* continued to highlight jazzwomen including articles on the 1978 and 1979 WJF festivals, the 1979 Salute to Women festival, and features on Mary Watkins, Carla Bley, Alive!, and Mary Osborne.⁵⁷ The feminist magazine, *Ms. Magazine*, also featured jazzwomen in the 1970s and 1980s, although not as frequently as *Paid My Dues*. The March 1978 issue featured an article on Marian McPartland and an ad for the inaugural WJF; the November 1978 issue included a feature on Toshiko Akiyoshi, as well as a listing of albums recorded by jazzwomen; the July 1981 article featured a short piece on Rosetta Reitz's two-part women in jazz concert at the 1981 Newport Jazz Festival; and the August 1981 *Ms. Magazine* featured Lena Horne on the cover.⁵⁸ In addition to jazz, *Ms. Magazine* also featured women's music, with a front cover article on the Women's Music Cultural Movement in the September 1980 issue, an article on women's music labels in September 1977, and an article on Sweet Honey in the Rock in September 1978.⁵⁹

In comparison, WJF was written about only five times in *Down Beat* from 1978 to 1985, with short articles on the first through third, sixth, and final festivals.⁶⁰ Salute was never written

1 (Fall 1978); Susan Abod, "And All That Jazz," *Paid My Dues* 3, no 2 (Mar-May 1979); Susan Abod, "And All That Jazz," *Paid My Dues* 3, no 3 (Jul-Sept 1979); Susan Abod, "And All That Jazz," *Paid My Dues* 3, no 4 (Oct-Dec 1979).

⁵⁷ Susan Abod, "K.C. Jazzwomen," *Paid My Dues* 2, no 3 (Spring 1978): 22-25; Cathy Lee, "A Salute to Women in Jazz," *Paid My Dues* 3, no 4 (Oct-Dec 1979): 28-29 and 38; Therese Edell and Teresa Boykin, "Jazzwomen '79," *Paid My Dues* 3, no 3 (July-Sept 1979): 24-37; Cathy Lee, "Carla Bley: A Look At This Multitalented Woman," *Paid My Dues* 3, no 3 (July-Sept 1979): 22-23; Susan Abod, "Mary Osborne: An Interview," and "Musical Foremothers," *Paid My Dues* 3, no 2 (March-May 1979): 21-23, 34-35; Karen Corti, "Alive!: An Interview," *Paid My Dues* 3, no 4 (Oct-Dec 1979): 14-16.

⁵⁸ Annie Gottlieb, "Marian McPartland- Everything a Jazz Musician Is Not Supposed To Be," *Ms. Magazine* (March 1978): 24-28; Cathy Lee, "Who's Who at the First Women's Jazz Festival," *Ms. Magazine* (March 1978): 27; Leonard Feather, "Toshiko Akiyoshi: The Leader of the Band," *Ms. Magazine* (November 1978): 38-40; Sheree Crute, "Jazz: We Didn't Always Sing the Moaning/Groaning Blues," *Ms. Magazine* (July 1981): 19; Marcia Gillespie, "Lena Horne Finds Her Music, Her Daughter, And Her Self," *Ms. Magazine* (August 1981): 43-47.

⁵⁹ Susan McHenry, "Testifying with 'Sweet Honey in the Rock,'" *Ms. Magazine* (September 1978): 37 and 41; Barbara Pepe, "A Revolution Per Minute: Woman's Labels," *Ms. Magazine* (December 1977): 57-58 and 78; Pamela Brandt, "The New Woman Sound Hits the Chart," *Ms. Magazine* (September 1980): 66-67, 88, and 97.

⁶⁰ Chuck Berg, "International Premiere of Women's Jazz Festival," *Down Beat* 45, no 14 (August 10th, 1978): 46-47; Leonard Feather, "Caught!: Second Annual Women's Jazz Festival," *Down Beat* 46, no 11 (June 7th, 1979): 34, 36-37; Leonard Feather, "Women's Jazz Festival: Kansas City, Missouri," *Down Beat* 47, no 10 (July 1980) 57-58;

about in *Down Beat* and was only briefly mentioned in a “NYC, LA, & Chgo” section in August 1980, and twice in the “Big City Beat” section in the June and July 1982 issues.⁶¹ The smaller festivals like Lulu White’s and From Bessie to Billie to Now do not appear. During this period, few women were featured in *Down Beat*, and those that were certainly were not the up-and-coming all women ensembles and artists performing at WJF and Salute. Jazz scholar Kelsey Klotz notes that in *Down Beat*

the number of features written about women performers is miniscule. Between 1962 and 1979, there were 402 issues of *Down Beat*. Given that there were regularly about 4 features per issue, that would equal somewhere around 1608 features total. 47 of those were solo women features, which reflects about 3% of the features in the period.⁶²

Additionally, in the 1980s, only four women were featured on *Down Beat*’s cover: Toshiko Akiyoshi, Joanne Brackeen, Sarah Vaughan, and Linda Ronstadt.⁶³ As one of the oldest and respected jazz magazines, *Down Beat*’s exclusion of jazzwomen speaks volumes about the perceived contributions of women to jazz’s history, particularly when compared with the jazz coverage of women’s magazines like *Paid My Dues* and *Ms. Magazine*.

A few women’s music and gender and jazz scholars, such as Eileen Hayes, Sherrie Tucker, Boden Sandstrom, and Linda Dahl, have acknowledged that some musicians existed within both spaces.⁶⁴ Mentions of the intersections are usually brief and have yet to take center stage in women’s music or gender and jazz research. Outside of Carolyn Brewer’s book *Changing the Tune: The Kansas City Women’s Jazz Festival, 1978-1985*, little historiographic

Tom McDermott, “Women’s Fest Turns Six,” *Down Beat* 50, no 6 (June 1983): 12; Carolyn Wyman, “Women’s Fest Returns,” *Down Beat* 52, no 8 (August 1985): 12.

⁶¹ “NYC, LA, & Chgo,” *Down Beat* 47, no 8 (August 1980); “Big City Beat,” *Down Beat* 49, no 6 (June 1982): 12; “Big City Beat,” *Down Beat* 49, no 7 (July 1982): 13.

⁶² Kelsey Klotz, “Fractured Sounds and Masculine Solidarity: Jazz Patriarchy in Print, 1960-1979,” paper presented at the Society for American Music, Richmond, VA, March 13, 2026.

⁶³ Klotz, “Fractured Sounds.”

⁶⁴ Eileen M. Hayes, *Songs in Black and Lavender: Race, Sexual Politics, and Women’s Music* (University of Illinois Press, 2010); Sherrie Tucker, *Swing Shift: “All-Girl” Bands of the 1940s* (Duke University Press, 2000); Dahl, *Stormy Weather*.

scholarship exists on the women's jazz festivals. All the information I recovered on these festivals came from archival ephemera primarily found in women's music archives– not typical jazz archives.⁶⁵

Conclusion

The women's music community has taken care to archive their stories, or what they call their *herstories*, which include the stories of many jazzwomen and jazzwomen spaces. The majority of my research for this project came about from discoveries made primarily outside of major jazz archives in the Women's Music Archives records and collected music at Smith College. Jazzwomen have historically been gatekept from jazz communities and narratives because of their gender. Further, standard jazz narratives are rarely associated with feminist movements, and certainly not with lesbian-separatism, and scholars have not investigated feminist spaces for jazz involvement. Jazz histories do not evoke images of feminism, and feminist histories do not evoke images of jazz. Jazz historiography must work to expand its locations of archival investigation in order to accommodate the intersectional identities of jazzwomen. The Women's Music Cultural Movement proves to have been a space that celebrated jazzwomen's success and fostered nonnormative jazzwomen, and the women's music community worked to preserve those narratives. It is essential that we study the women's jazz festivals to understand how jazz feminism has developed throughout jazzwomen's histories, as well as shed light on the intersections between two seemingly unrelated spaces, women's music and jazzwomen communities.

⁶⁵ There are brief mentions of the Lulu White weekend in a clipping from Melba Liston's folder at the Rutger's Jazz Research Institute filing cabinets, but it is still classified as ephemera, not within a larger collection.

Chapter 2. “Call It Jazz”: The Recorded Footprint of Jazzwomen in Women’s Music

“Is it blues, is it gospel, salsa or soul?
Is it āwā or bembé, perhaps guaguanco?
Samba or rumba, it’s all these and more
Call it Jazz, if you like.
Is it avant garde, classical, standards or swing?
Is it straight-ahead bebop or ballads we sing?
It’s any of these and it’s all of these things.
Call it Jazz.”
– “Call It Jazz” by Janet Small, pianist of Alive!

In 1981, jazz group Alive!, whose members were all white women, released their second album *Call It Jazz*.¹ It was recorded over three nights at The Great American Music Hall in San Francisco, CA, and despite its title, *Call It Jazz* does not present itself as a traditional jazz album.² The performances range from up-tempo swing originals and down and dirty blues to stylistically typical women’s music compositions and a Gil Scott-Heron piece. Each track on *Call It Jazz* takes listeners on a different musical journey, blurring the lines between genre and musical identification.

The ambiguous nature of *Call It Jazz* is hinted at early in the album in the lyrics to the second track, “Call it Jazz,” the album’s namesake. The song’s hard-driving, in-the-pocket swing provides a deceptive foundation to the message in the lyrics, listed above. Alive!’s vocalist Rhiannon pauses right before singing the first, “if you like,” emphasizing the phrase, beckoning the audience to listen closely to what she has to say. At first, Rhiannon’s tone sounds nonchalant

¹ The members of Alive! included Barbara Borden on drums, Carolyn Brandy on congas and small percussion, Rhiannon on vocals, Janet Small on piano, and Susan Vincenza on upright bass. Alive!, *Call It Jazz*, Alive!, May 17, 18, & 19, 1981, Redwood Records, 1981, LP.

² Alive!, *Call It Jazz*.

but changes to a more playful and cheekier jib as she continues to sing. The other verses' lyrics continue to question the genre, influences, and ethnic roots of jazz. After four short verses, the first two verses are repeated at a double-time swing, pushing the emphasis to the lyrics. At the end of the repetition of the second verse, Rhiannon starts her scat solo by ad libbing off the last phrase "Call it," without singing the last word of the phrase, "jazz." After a few instrumental solos, Rhiannon returns, repeating the verses again but with more chutzpah and emphasis than in the first statement. "Call It Jazz" ends with an ensemble break and Rhiannon's last line, "That indigenous American creative art form called jazz," which cues the ensemble to come back in to provide harmonic closure.³ Performed by an all-woman ensemble, *Call It Jazz* and "Call It Jazz" prompt listeners to ask themselves, what constitutes jazz? Who gets to define jazz as a genre? Is it the listener or the performers? If jazz is influenced by a myriad of different musical genres, then what really is jazz?

Throughout their career, Alive! had to negotiate their musical identity as they navigated both the jazz and women's music communities. Although *Call It Jazz* is not representative of a typical jazz album from this period, Alive! performed in various jazz settings and, starting in 1981, performed multiple years in a row at the Kansas City Women's Jazz Festival, as I discussed in the previous chapter.⁴ At the same time, Alive! was active in the women's music scene, frequently hosted jazz clinics at the NWMF, and are often named by women's music participants as helping to bring jazz to the women's music festival circuit.⁵ Alive! recorded their

³ This phrase is only sung once at the very end of the tune.

⁴ "WJF 1981 Program," Box 16, Folder 15, Leonard Feather Collection, International Jazz Collections, University of Idaho, Moscow, Idaho.

⁵ Rhiannon, interview by Lael Dratfield, December 8, 2025, Zoom; Boden Sandstrom, interview by Lael Dratfield, November 13, 2025, Zoom; "Fourth National Women's Music Festival," Box 10, 1st-4th NWMF, 1974-1977, Women's Music Archive records and collected music, Sophia Smith Collection of Women's History, Smith College Special Collections, Northampton, MA; "5th National Women's Music Festival," "6th National Women's Music Festival," and "National Women's Music Festival, May 29-June 1," Box 10, 5th-7th NWMF, 1974-1977, Women's

second album *Call It Jazz* with Redwood Records, one of the many all-women record labels that formed during the Women's Music Cultural Movement in the 1970s and 1980s. Redwood Records, along with Olivia Records, recorded many artists like Alive!, whose music does not fit into a standard jazz or women's music definition. Alive! chose to record *Call It Jazz* with an all-women label rather than with an established jazz label, complicating their identity as a jazz ensemble. By choosing to record with a women's music label, Alive! directed their music towards a feminist audience. Recording with a jazz label would have allowed them to promote their music within jazz circuits, rather than a music community that supported a variety of genres. *Call It Jazz* can be understood as a representation of the ensemble's refusal to conform to music industry standards—a feminist practice of refusal—and demonstrates one of the ways women artists like Alive! navigated multiple contrasting musical spaces.

Pianist and composer-arranger Mary Watkins, along with Ellen Seeling and Jean Fineberg of the ensemble Deuce, are examples of other women artists in this period whose straddling of both women's music and jazz spaces allowed, and forced, them to not conform to a single genre or music industry standard, engaging instead with a practice of refusal. Black feminist theorist Tina M. Campt, one of the founding members of the Practicing Refusal Collective, describes a practice of refusal as using “negation as a generative and creative source of disorderly power to embrace the possibility of living otherwise. The practice of refusal is a striving to create possibility in the face of negation.”⁶ Alive!, Watkins, and Deuce made music and built lasting musical careers despite the negation of jazzwomen's existence, innovation, and success, practicing the type of refusal Campt describes.

Music Archive records and collected music, Sophia Smith Collection of Women's History, Smith College Special Collections, Northampton, MA.

⁶ Tina M. Campt, “The Visual Frequency of Black Life: Love, Labor, and the Practice of Refusal,” *Social Text* 140 37, no 3 (2019): 25.

The musical projects imagined by Alive!, Watkins, and Deuce required recording labels that supported non-traditional musical projects. Each of these musicians recorded albums with Redwood Records and/or Olivia Records. The creative and organizational missions of Olivia and Redwood Records created a space for these women to make music with fewer constraints than a popular jazz label. Although Olivia and Redwood did not define the musical careers of Alive!, Watkins, and Deuce, their role in recording the sonic footprint of these jazzwomen is important in understanding the broader intersections between women's music and jazzwomen. These jazzwomen practiced what I refer to as a *queer genre of refusal*. This term, which I define in the next paragraph, draws from queer theory, Camp's understanding of a practice of refusal, musical genre, and music industry standards. Watkins, Alive!, and Deuce's musical imaginations reflected their jazz and women's music identities in myriad ways that made them simultaneously visible and invisible in jazz and women's music histories.

Through a close analysis of Watkins's albums *Something Moving* (Olivia Records 1978), *Winds of Change* (Palo Alto 1982), and *Spiritsongs* (Redwood Records 1985), Alive!'s *Call It Jazz* (Redwood Records 1981), and Deuce's *Deuce* (Redwood Records 1986), I identify how Watkins, Alive!, and Deuce's participation in both women's music and jazzwomen spaces can be understood, on micro and macro scales, through the framework of a queer genre of refusal. I direct Camp's practice of refusal toward musical genre, understanding a queer genre of refusal as the ways in which a musician, intentionally or unintentionally, refuses to conform to typical genre expectations and/or music industry standards. A queer genre of refusal may appear as musical transgression or innovation but always within the context of gendered negation. Orienting this definition toward queerness, I draw on José Muñoz's concepts of queer futurity understanding "queerness as a possibility, a sense of self-knowing, a mode of sociality and

relationality.”⁷ Muñoz explains that, “Queerness is also a performative because it is not simply a being but a doing for and toward the future. Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world.”⁸ The refusal of music genre and expectation through gendered negation becomes a symbol of queer futurity, a sonic queer act. Jazzwomen like Watkins, Alive!, and Deuce perform a queer genre of refusal through a type of sonic seesawing throughout their recorded works, in which each track seesaws between musical genres. Olivia and Redwood Records became spaces in which jazzwomen could perform a queer genre of refusal and build liberating musical careers when their musical aspirations did not align with mainstream jazz attitudes.

Olivia and Redwood Records

One of the most defining features of the Women’s Music Cultural Movement was the creation of the first all-women record labels. These labels formed a self-sustaining music industry that created opportunities for women that were denied to them or harder to access in the mainstream recording industry.⁹ During the peak of the Women’s Music Cultural Movement, women’s music artists were able to maintain careers by performing and recording primarily within the women’s music community. For artists like Watkins, Alive!, and Deuce, whose atypical jazz careers alienated them from the mainstream jazz recording circuit, women’s music labels became spaces for them to record their music and build lasting careers. Olivia Records and Redwood Records, two of the first and most prominent women’s music record labels, were

⁷ José Muñoz, “Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts,” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 8, no 2 (1996): 5-16.

⁸ José Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York University Press, 2009), 1.

⁹ In addition to record labels and record companies, all-women production companies and distribution companies were formed. The production companies helped produce the women’s music festivals and women’s music concerts throughout the country and the distribution companies were responsible for getting the albums produced by the labels out to their audiences.

responsible for recording some of Watkins's, Alive!'s, and Deuce's albums. Each label had specific organizational and creative goals that helped them foster inclusive environments. Olivia Records, the first all-women record label and collective, worked to create a racially diverse and gender inclusive community, acting as an example for future women's music labels and creating a welcoming space for artists like Watkins to jumpstart their recording career. Redwood Records's 1980s rebranding expanded their recording focus beyond women's music to include more genres, diversifying their artist demographic to include jazzwomen like Watkins, Alive!, and Deuce. Additionally, Redwood's global and community outreach program made the company more politically and socially conscious, which better aligned with the goals of marginalized women. Although Olivia and Redwood Records did not determine the careers of Watkins, Alive!, and Deuce, the goals and environments imagined by each label contributed to the women's music recording industry and the broader Women's Music Cultural Movement, fostering acceptance for jazzwomen to record albums and build musical careers within women's music.

Olivia Records

"She was a big tough woman, the first to come along/ That showed me being female meant you still could be strong," are the opening lines to Meg Christian's "Ode to a Gym Teacher."¹⁰ One of the first songs considered to be a women's music composition, "Ode to a Gym Teacher" was recorded on Meg Christian's 1974 album *I Know You Know*, the first album released by a women's music record label, Olivia Records.¹¹ Forming from the Washington D.C. lesbian-feminist collective, The Furies, Olivia began in 1973 with the goal to create a record

¹⁰ Meg Christian, *I Know You Know*, Olivia Records, 1974, LP.

¹¹ Meg Christian, *I Know You Know*.

label that would “seek out and encourage women’s musical achievements.”¹² A mixture of performers and non-musicians who had gotten involved in the developing women’s music scene, the women of Olivia knew little about recording music, but were motivated to create a space where women, particularly lesbians, could thrive in a non-oppressive environment. Ginny Berson, one of Olivia’s founding members, described in her book, *Olivia on the Record: A Radical Experiment in Women’s Music*, that Olivia

Would operate collectively. We would work exclusively with women. We would treat all women with respect. We would record music that celebrated all aspects of women’s lives. We would operate with transparency. We would not create a hierarchy or star system—we believed that all work was valuable and should be equally compensated and honored. We wanted to create an alternative economic institution that would eventually enable us to control all means of production... We would be as non-capitalistic as possible...¹³

Olivia Records’s original mission reflected an anti-capitalist, lesbian-separatist belief of forming a space that was run by women for women. Olivia was designed to operate not only as a record label, but as an educational, community-centered collective geared toward expanding women’s recording and production skills, something they were frequently denied access to in the recording industry. In the liner notes to Christian’s album, Olivia included a statement that explained,

Our purposes are to make high quality women’s music available to the public, to give women musicians access to the recording industry, to offer training in the technical, musical, and other fields related to the recording industry, and to provide jobs with decent pay in non-oppressive conditions.¹⁴

Olivia created different structures within the label to enact these beliefs, such as through their various hiring strategies, which I discuss below. Shortly after recording Christian’s album, Olivia moved their operations to Los Angeles, CA, and later Oakland, CA, locations that were more central to the growing women’s music scene. With big dreams and little resources, Olivia had

¹² Ginny Berson, *Olivia on the Record: A Radical Experiment in Women’s Music* (aunt lute books, 2020), 69.

¹³ Berson, *Olivia on the Record*, 69.

¹⁴ Berson, *Olivia on the Record*, 107.

many things to learn about being a record label, but the women who ran the label were rapidly developing their skills, resources, and community.

Early on, Olivia had a small and devoted listener base through record sales and artist performances. However, in the first few years of organizing and recording, Olivia recognized that their team was made up entirely of middle-class white women and that the music they were producing was primarily reaching a similar demographic.¹⁵ Berson explained that the women of Olivia understood that their race and class privilege had allowed them to establish themselves in certain capacities, but they wanted their work to reflect their original mission of creating an inclusive space for all women. Following this self-reflection, Olivia took steps to diversify their staff, audience, and general understanding of the intersecting oppressions faced by other minoritized women.¹⁶ First, Olivia identified that they needed to include women of color in the collective. Berson explained that,

We knew that when we invited women of color to join us, we would not do it one at a time; there had to be at least two coming in at a time, and more would be better. We thought they would need support from each other, and we also wanted the variety of wisdom and experience that each woman would bring. We didn't want to depend on one

¹⁵ Middle-class white women were, of course, a large percentage of the women involved in the Women's Music Cultural Movement; however, a narrative that presents the movement as a white only space is misrepresentative of the broader history. Women's Music, due to its connection to lesbian-separatism, is often understood as a predominantly white space, but scholarship by Eileen Hayes identifies the pockets of influential Black performers like Linda Tillery, Mary Watkins, Sweet Honey and the Rock, etc., who were central to the movement. Additionally, women like June Millington represent the AAPI involvement in the movement as well. The historical portrayal of women's music as mostly white, especially key musical figures, erases the central role women of color played in the early development of women's music.

¹⁶ In an interview I conducted with June Millington, Millington explained how she has felt erased within women's music history, especially as a Filipina American woman. Millington, who is primarily known in women's music for her guitar, singing, and composing skills, is often forgotten for her role as a producer on various women's music albums such as Watkins's *Something Moving* and two of Holly Near's albums. Millington, whose production skills are evident on *Something Moving*, which will be discussed later in this chapter, explained that the last time she was with some of the Olivia women, they had all forgotten that she had produced *Something Moving*, and instead assumed that one of the Black women on the album had produced it. This highlights how in certain spheres, racial differences are perceived as being only on a Black and white binary, further othering the different experiences of other POC and AAPI women within white spaces and white perceived histories. Olivia's mission may have originally started as being centered on diverse hiring practices and thinking but was likely not as pervasive as Berson depicts. Ann Hackler and June Millington, interview by Lael Dratfield, November 26, 2025, Goshen, MA.

or two women of color to represent what all women of color thought or felt about anything, or to make them responsible for widening our view.¹⁷

Berson went on to explain that Olivia knew this type of hiring would dramatically change the culture of Olivia, and that the white women already involved would need to be uncomfortable in difference to enact actual change. In 1976, Linda Tillery, a drummer, percussionist, and composer, became the first Black woman to join Olivia. Tillery had recorded on Olivia's *BeBe K'Roche* (1976) and was quick to join after a positive recording experience.¹⁸ In 1977, after switching their operations to the Oakland, CA area, they hired poet and musician Michelle Clinton, who Tillery had introduced to Olivia.¹⁹ Soon after, Holly Near met Mary Watkins while on tour looking for a woman pianist, and after hitting it off, introduced her to the collective. Tillery and Watkins are credited on numerous Olivia recordings as performers, composers, and arrangers, and are central to understanding the musical and artistic achievements within Olivia's history. Their involvement is also credited with the diversification of musical influences within women's music. In a 1988 conversation with Watkins and Tillery, interviewer Mary S. Polluck opens by explaining how certain musicians brought in different musical influences,

...such artists as Meg Christian have worked in the folk tradition; Chris Williamson and June Millington have brought in pop/rock influence; Izquierda and Holly Near have drawn on Latin rhythms. Watkins and Tillery are largely responsible for the strong strain in women's music of various black musical idioms—jazz, rhythm and blues, gospel.²⁰

¹⁷ Berson, *Olivia on the Record*, 220.

¹⁸ *Bebe K'Roche* was also one of Olivia's first projects that recorded an ensemble that performed music different than the typical folk style that had become a staple of women's music. Berson, *Olivia on the Record*, 220-21; Bebe K'Roche, *Bebe K'Roche*, Olivia Records, 1976, LP.

¹⁹ According to Berson, Olivia moved to Oakland because Tillery needed to stay in the area to help care for her mom. Tillery was commuting between Oakland and LA when she joined Olivia. The women's music scene was also becoming more substantive in Oakland and was a better location for Olivia's goals. Watkin's was also located in the Oakland area during this time. Berson, *Olivia on the Record*, 220-21.

²⁰ Mary S. Polluck, "The Politics of Women's Music: A Conversation with Linda Tillery and Mary Watkins," in *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 10, no 1 (1988): 14.

Their work recording as solo artists for Olivia, as well as contributing to other albums, can be heard throughout Olivia's releases.

Olivia's inclusive goals expanded to gender as well. Around the same time Tillery, Watkins, and Clinton joined, Sandy Stone, a trans woman, began working as a sound engineer for Olivia.²¹ Stone, who had spent time working in major studios in LA, had advanced engineering and production skills that she shared with other women at Olivia. A press release from Olivia explained that "Sandy Stone was referred to us as an excellent woman engineer, perhaps even the Goddess-sent engineering wizard we had so long sought."²² They went on to explain how Stone

contributed to our group not only her amazing technical skills, but also a vision of ways to share them that goes beyond what we were able to imagine. For example, besides training women in sound engineering, she will actually be building our recording studio and will be apprenticing other women in the techniques of designing and building electronic equipment.²³

Hiring Stone indicated a broader intent to support *all* women and led to collective skill sharing within Olivia. Collective skill sharing is an essential element to women's music because it allowed the movement to become a sustainable and self-reliant musical movement and

²¹ The women of Olivia learned about Stone's trans identity in their second meeting with her, and after some discussion, were accepting of her involvement, despite the broader trans exclusion in women's music. In 1976, the women's music community learned of Stone's identity and began retaliating against Olivia. A multi-year battle, including press-releases, meetings, and an event Berson called "Slimy Sunday," happened in response to Stone's involvement with Olivia. Olivia supported Stone and refused to objectify her to appease the demands of the feminist and women's music community. Stone eventually left Olivia, unable to endure the hate coming from the outside community, but her contributions and role in mentoring other women cannot be dismissed and erased from Olivia and women's music histories. The history of trans exclusion in the Women's Music Cultural Movement is deeply complicated and requires more space and care than is possible in this chapter and thesis. Berson, *Olivia on the Record*, 184-87.

²² "Recently a leaflet has...", Box 15, Olivia Records, Women's Music Archive records and collected music, Sophia Smith Collection of Women's History, Smith College Special Collections, Northampton, MA.

²³ It is unclear whether Stone ever got the opportunity to build the recording studio for Olivia, but it is interesting to note that this was something the company aspired to pursue. "Recently a leaflet has...", Box 15, Olivia Records, Women's Music Archive records and collected music, Sophia Smith Collection of Women's History, Smith College Special Collections, Northampton, MA.

industry.²⁴ Stone went on to help engineer two of Olivia's more widely known albums: *Bebe K'Rouche* (1976) and *Lesbian Concentrate* (1977).²⁵

Ultimately, Olivia created a record company and collective that worked to create a diverse and inclusive space within the women's music community. Olivia represents how women in the movement wanted to create radical spaces for women to express themselves freely outside of patriarchal systems. Many of the women who began working with Olivia early in their careers, such as Watkins, Tillery, and Millington, became central figures in the women's music genre. Olivia was not without its flaws and still fell victim to dominating capitalistic systems but was the first women's record label to strive for difference.²⁶ Olivia stood as an example for other women's music record labels, like Redwood.

Redwood Records

"Why do we call them the enemy/ this struggling nation we've been bombing across the sea," are the opening lines to Holly Near's song "No More Genocide," the second track on her

²⁴ My use of the term self-reliant refers to women's music's lesbian-separatist roots and their desire to be an all-women movement. For Olivia, this meant not receiving help from men, even to acquire necessary audio-engineering skills.

²⁵ *Lesbian Concentrate* is one of Olivia's most political albums. Released in 1979 in response to Dade County Florida and Anita Bryant's anti-gay legislation, *Lesbian Concentrate* is a compilation album including compositions by Watkins, historic Blues Women Ma Rainey, Linda Tillery, Holly Near, and other prominent women's music artists. *Lesbian Concentrate*, miscellaneous artists, Olivia Records, 1977, LP; Bebe K'Rouche, *Bebe K'Rouche*, Olivia Records, 1976, LP.

²⁶ June Millington explained in an interview that although Olivia had intentions to exist outside of a capitalist system, it still functioned within one which resulted in the label exploiting artists. Millington explain that "It's a business, yah know. It's a business, it's not a nonprofit... and they did exactly what you do in a business like that, which is you exploit the raw materials which are the artists. And that is exactly what they did." Her partner, Ann Hackler went on to explain "*The Changer and the Changed* yah know was obviously the biggest album. But on the inside, to Chris, they really misused her, she ended up broke and cleaning houses in San Francisco, they were taking that money, they turned it right away into this is everybody's money this is not Chris's money yah know." Millington explained that Chris Williamson had to buy her masters back from Olivia around 15 years ago. Additionally, they did not always provide financial support to artists. Hackler explained that "Bebe K'Rouche didn't feel like they were treated very well. They complained bitterly of breaking down, the van broke down in Arkansas and Olivia wouldn't send them any money to fix the van." Millington only recently got her masters back from Olivia for her album *Heartsong* (1981). Ann Hackler and June Millington, Interview, November 26, 2025, Goshen, MA.

debut album *Hang In There* (1973).²⁷ An anti-Vietnam War response, *Hang In There* was recorded by Redwood Records, which was formed in 1973 by Near and fellow musician and collaborator Jeff Langley.²⁸ Redwood was originally created to help distribute Near and Langley's anti-Vietnam War music, but by 1978 had begun transitioning from an individually owned company to a company owned by four women: Near, Marsha Cummings, Trudy Fulton, and Torie Osborn.²⁹ Redwood expanded its mission to include women's music, which Near claimed was a result of her own growing awareness of women's "political/cultural work as musicians, [and the] record and production companies and distributors," who were providing creative spaces for women.³⁰

Over the next few years, Redwood went through a variety of leadership and organizational changes to try and implement their new goals. In 1978, in addition to a headquarters move to San Francisco, Near relinquished her ownership of Redwood to focus on her music and become a full-time Redwood recording artist, leaving Osborn, Cummings, and Fulton as co-owners.³¹ In a 1979 letter written by Osborn, Osborn highlights how Redwood recognized the power of women's music and wanted to focus their energy on getting their music

²⁷ Holly Near, *Hang In There*, Redwood Records, 1973, LP.

²⁸ "Redwood Records January 1978," Box 15, Redwood Records, Women's Music Archive records and collected music, Sophia Smith Collection of Women's History, Smith College Special Collections, Northampton, MA.

²⁹ Amy Horowitz was one of the original four owners of Redwood but left sometime within the first year of ownership. Horowitz is listed as an owner on a 1978 document, but a separate press release, undated, lists Torie Osborn, and Osborn is the author of multiple Redwood letters from 1979. "Redwood Records January 1978," Box 15, Redwood Records, Women's Music Archive records and collected music, Sophia Smith Collection of Women's History, Smith College Special Collections, Northampton, MA; "...And Introducing the Women of Redwood," Box 15, Redwood Records, Women's Music Archive records and collected music, Sophia Smith Collection of Women's History, Smith College Special Collections, Northampton, MA.

³⁰ "Redwood Records January 1978," Box 15, Redwood Records, Women's Music Archive records and collected music, Sophia Smith Collection of Women's History, Smith College Special Collections, Northampton, MA; "...And Introducing the Women of Redwood," Box 15, Redwood Records, Women's Music Archive records and collected music, Sophia Smith Collection of Women's History, Smith College Special Collections, Northampton, MA.

³¹ "Redwood Records 18 October 1978," Box 15, Redwood Records, Women's Music Archive records and collected music, Sophia Smith Collection of Women's History, Smith College Special Collections, Northampton, MA.

into other communities to build coalitions and inter-movement solidarity. Osborn writes that, “Women’s music is just about the strongest radical cultural force alive and kicking in this society and I think that it could become much more a part of other progressive movement and communities than it has—because of homophobia on their part, and lack of outreach on ours.”³² She goes on to say that Redwood will try to get their records promoted to

liberal feminists (NOW, National Women’s Pol. Caucus); gay men; lesbians not identified with the women’s movement; “New Age” and spiritual people; women and men of color; in particular through Black and other Third World organizations that exist locally and nationally; the left, in particular the anti-nuke movement, the clerical organizing wing of the feminist left; the straight, spiritually-oriented counter-culture into decentralized technology, alternative lifestyles, etc.³³

Redwood’s music and community goals existed far beyond the confines of the Women’s Music Cultural Movement and their intent to build musical coalitions became central to their later recording and community practices. Still trying to work out financial and administrative problems within the company, Redwood recorded only twenty albums between 1979 and 1984.

In 1985, Redwood rebranded themselves, introducing their new goals at the Redwood ’85 Music Festival in September of that year.³⁴ In the program, Redwood wrote that, “We have a firm commitment to present a variety of music and cultural styles including Feminist, New Song, New Acoustic, Blackwomansound, Rhythm and Blues, and Folk/Rock— from the U.S. and

³² “Some thought on Kansas City and beyond,” Box 15, Redwood Records, Women’s Music Archive records and collected music, Sophia Smith Collection of Women’s History, Smith College Special Collections, Northampton, MA.

³³ “Some thought on Kansas City and beyond,” Box 15, Redwood Records, Women’s Music Archive records and collected music, Sophia Smith Collection of Women’s History, Smith College Special Collections, Northampton, MA.

³⁴ In an undated press release from Redwood written by Osborn, Near, and Carol Orshan, Redwood announces that they are transitioning into becoming a record label instead of a full-fledged record company. They state that they are unable to financially record artists who are not directly signed to their label, noting specific disappointment over being unable to record Alive!. After this letter, there is a multi-year gap in archival material in the folders at the Smith collection, but it appears Redwood spends the next five years reworking and rebranding the label to achieve their larger outreach goals as a record company. “Dear women who have worked with Redwood,” Box 15, Redwood Records, Women’s Music Archive records and collected music, Sophia Smith Collection of Women’s History, Smith College Special Collections, Northampton, MA.

countries around the world.”³⁵ The program explains that of the company’s forty recorded albums, twenty were recorded in the last twelve months.³⁶ Of the twenty albums recorded, Mary Watkins’s *Spiritsongs* is listed, as well as Black women’s music artists Linda Tillery and Sweet Honey in the Rock. In 1986, at the second annual Redwood Festival, Deuce is listed as both featured performers and Redwood recording artists, as well as Sistahboom, a women’s percussion and dance group run by Alive!’s percussionist Carolyn Brandy.³⁷ Redwood’s increased record production and recording of artists such as Watkins, Tillery, Deuce, and Sweet Honey in the Rock represents the company’s concrete actions in expanding the demographic of their artists and audience, specifically to include women of color.

Part of this genre expansion included Redwood’s commitment to recording South American artists, particularly artists from countries affected by political and social turmoil. Redwood recorded many Chilean, Nicaraguan, and other Latin American ensembles including Inti-Illimani, Sabiá, Sotavento, Guardabarranco, Salvador Bustos, and Victor Jara.³⁸ Redwood’s engagement with South American artists also reflected steps the company took to engage with community and global issues and expand their outreach beyond music. During Redwood’s

³⁵ “Music Festival, September 15, 1985, Redwood ’85,” Box 15, Redwood Records, Women’s Music Archive records and collected music, Sophia Smith Collection of Women’s History, Smith College Special Collections, Northampton, MA.

³⁶ “Music Festival, September 15, 1985, Redwood ’85,” Box 15, Redwood Records, Women’s Music Archive records and collected music, Sophia Smith Collection of Women’s History, Smith College Special Collections, Northampton, MA.

³⁷ “The Second Annual Redwood Festival,” Box 15, Redwood Records, Women’s Music Archive records and collected music, Sophia Smith Collection of Women’s History, Smith College Special Collections, Northampton, MA.

³⁸ The incorporation of Latin American music into the women’s music community by Near and Redwood was referenced by Polluck in her interview with Tillery and Watkins mentioned during the Olivia Records section. Additionally, ethnomusicologist Fernando Rios is currently exploring Holly Near and Redwood Records relationship with Latin American political movements. Fernando Rios, “‘Mujer Sandinista’: The *Nueva Canción* (New Song) Band Sabiá and the Intersections between the US-Central American Solidarity and Feminist/Women’s Movements,” paper presented at the Society for American Music, Richmond, VA, March 13, 2026; “Music That Rocks The Boat,” Box 15, Redwood Records, Women’s Music Archive records and collected music, Sophia Smith Collection of Women’s History, Smith College Special Collections, Northampton, MA.

rebranding, the company created the Redwood Records Cultural & Educational Fund (RRCEF) a “non-profit organization formed to coordinate the non-commercial educational and organizing work that is a part of Redwood Records’ commitment to progressive cultural work.”³⁹ In a newsletter from November 1986, Near explains how RRCEF

can make connections between diverse issues and groups by providing information and inspiration. Through VOICES (our newsletter), referrals, endorsements, technical assistance and a variety of cultural projects, RRCEF is able to extend our effectiveness far beyond what I and Redwood can do as an artist and record company.⁴⁰

Part of RRCEF’s work included organizing the 1986 panel discussion “How Do We Make it Through the 80’s?” with activists and educators Angela Davis, Starhawk, Aurora Levins Morales, and Near. In addition to expanding their recordings to include artists of various genres, Redwood enacted programs to build the types of musical coalitions Osborn wrote about in her 1979 press release. By expanding their company to include community engagement, mutual aid-like programs, music festivals, and Latin American music, Redwood created a socially and politically conscious record label that welcomed jazzwomen like Watkins, Alive!, and Deuce to participate in women’s music spaces.

Olivia and Redwood Records played important roles in building an inclusive recording community within the Women’s Music Cultural Movement, which allowed jazzwomen to safely build careers and record their music without restriction. As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, jazzwomen have historically been gatekept from the recording industry putting them at a disadvantage in a genre that prioritizes recorded works.⁴¹ Watkins, Alive!, and Deuce, whose

³⁹ “Music Festival, September 15, 1985, RRCEF,” Box 15, Redwood Records, Women’s Music Archive records and collected music, Sophia Smith Collection of Women’s History, Smith College Special Collections, Northampton, MA.

⁴⁰ “Redwood Records Cultural & Educational Fund,” Box 15, Redwood Records, Women’s Music Archive records and collected music, Sophia Smith Collection of Women’s History, Smith College Special Collections, Northampton, MA.

⁴¹ Darren Mueller, *At the Vanguard of Vinyl: A Cultural History of the Long-Playing Record in Jazz* (Duke University Press, 2024), 27.

sexuality, in addition to their gender, alienated them from jazz spaces, *were* a part of jazz history despite a lack of recorded work with jazz labels.⁴²

Sonic Seesawing and a Queer Genre of Refusal

Alive!, Deuce, and Watkins each had different relationships to jazz communities and women's music spaces, but each ultimately recorded most of their music with women's music labels. These jazzwomen have left sonic footprints because of Olivia and Redwood. Understanding the success of Watkins, Alive!, and Deuce in relationships with Olivia and Redwood Records is important for contextualizing the intersections of women's music and jazzwomen communities. This section explores how Alive!, Watkins, and Deuce are part of a queer genre of refusal through sonic seesawing, which can be heard on each artist's album(s) recorded with Olivia and Redwood Records. Sonic seesawing is a term I have created to describe the ways artists seesaw between musical genres on their albums. I utilize the term seesawing to denote the back-and-forth motion of a playground seesaw. In addition to its visual indexicality, the act of seesawing sometimes results in a physical disorientation that can occur from the constant and quick up-and-down movement. Similarly, sonic seesawing acts as a negation of music genre and industry expectations creating a potential sonic incoherency (i.e. disorientation). As I demonstrate in the following analyses, a sonic seesawing can be identified on micro and macro scales, sometimes as a seesawing between each track, sides of an LP, or consecutive recorded albums. In this section I first analyze Alive!'s *Call It Jazz* and Deuce's *Deuce* to explain how Alive! and Deuce perform sonic seesawing on a micro scale. Then, I

⁴² Mueller, *At the Vanguard of Vinyl*, 24-27; Sherrie Tucker, "When Did Jazz Go Straight?: A Queer Question For Jazz Studies," *Critical Studies in Improvisation* 4, no 2 (2008): 1-16; Sherrie Tucker, "When Subjects Don't Come Out," in *Queer Episodes: In Music and Modern Identity*, edited by Sophia Fuller and Lloyd Whitesell (University of Illinois Press, 2002): 293-310.

analyze Mary Watkins's albums *Something Moving*, *Winds of Change*, and *Spiritsongs*, demonstrating that, unlike *Alive!* and *Deuce*, Watkins performs a sonic seesawing on both a micro and macro scale. Each artist's performance of sonic seesawing contributes to my understanding of a queer genre of refusal and the different ways we can analyze the recorded works of jazzwomen in women's music.

Alive! and Deuce

The all-women jazz quintet *Alive!*, which included Barbara Borden on drums, Carolyn Brandy on congas and small percussion, Rhiannon on vocals, Janet Small on piano, and Susan Vincenza on upright bass, formed in San Francisco, CA in the 1970s within the women's music scene. Vincenza, Rhiannon, and Brandy met at a "Jazz Workshop for Women" in the Bay Area and decided to form a group, later meeting *Alive!*'s other members.⁴³ The ensemble played in local women's music spaces, such as women's coffee houses, until they were invited to perform at the 1976 National Women's Music Festival.⁴⁴ After gaining popularity at the NWMF, the ensemble was invited to perform at the WJF in 1981.⁴⁵ Wanting to be more involved with the jazz community, *Alive!* tried to break into the mainstream jazz circuit at various points in their career. The ensemble had some success performing at smaller jazz festivals, such as WJF, but was never invited to larger festivals like the San Francisco Jazz Festival, in the ensemble's home city.⁴⁶ *Alive!* recorded their second album, *Call It Jazz* (1981) with Redwood Records because

⁴³ Rhiannon, interview by Lael Dratfield, December 8th, 2025, Zoom.

⁴⁴ Rhiannon, interview; "Third National Women's Music Festival," 1st-4th NWMF, 1974-1977, Box 10, Women's Music Archive records and collected music, Sophia Smith Collection of Women's History, Smith College Special Collections, Northampton, MA.

⁴⁵ "Fourth Annual Women's Jazz Festival," Women's Music Festivals, 1977-1987, Folder 15, Box 16, Leonard Feather Collection, International Jazz Collections, University of Idaho, Moscow, Idaho.

⁴⁶ In an interview, vocalist Rhiannon noted that *Alive!* was only invited to perform at jazz festivals where the festival directors had minority identities, specifically Black. Larger festivals and other jazz spaces would not see past their all-women status to their musical skill. Rhiannon, interview.

the label had more power and access to sales markets which gave the company the ability to distribute Alive!'s record beyond women's music. Even with Redwood's help, though, record stores refused to categorize Alive! as jazz, restricting their listener demographic.⁴⁷

Unlike Alive!, Ellen Seeling (trumpet and flugel) and Jean Fineberg (saxophone) of Deuce simultaneously established themselves within the NYC jazz scene and women's music communities. Both freelance musicians, Seeling and Fineberg made careers out of their ability to perform multiple genres at high degrees. As the previous chapter mentioned, Fineberg was active with the UJC in New York City and performed at both the WJF and Salute festivals in the late 1970s before Deuce was formed. In 1975, Seeling and Fineberg met while recording for Allen Touissant and the all-women rock group Isis.⁴⁸ Invited to tour with Laura Nyro in 1976, Seeling and Fineberg worked over the next few years to refine their sound.⁴⁹ Seeling and Fineberg performed with the likes of David Bowie, Joe Cocker, Chic and Latin Fever, Melba Liston, and Dizzy Gillespie.⁵⁰ In 1980, both Seeling and Fineberg received grants from the NEA in composition and performance, which spearheaded the official formation of Deuce and later helped fund their album *Deuce* with Redwood Records in 1986.⁵¹ Deuce often performed with pianist Julie Homie and percussionist Nydia "Liberty" Mata, other musicians who navigated both jazzwomen and women's music spaces. Despite having successful performance careers in jazz, Latin, and women's music, Deuce only ever recorded one album and are mostly absent from music narratives.

⁴⁷ Rhiannon, interview.

⁴⁸ "Biography," Deuce, Box 3, Women's Music Archive records and collected music, Sophia Smith Collection of Women's History, Smith College Special Collections, Northampton, MA.

⁴⁹ "Biography," Deuce, Box 3, Women's Music Archive records and collected music, Sophia Smith Collection of Women's History, Smith College Special Collections, Northampton, MA.

⁵⁰ "Credits," Deuce, Box 3, Women's Music Archive records and collected music, Sophia Smith Collection of Women's History, Smith College Special Collections, Northampton, MA.

⁵¹ "Biography," Deuce, Box 3, Women's Music Archive records and collected music, Sophia Smith Collection of Women's History, Smith College Special Collections, Northampton, MA.

Alive! and Deuce's lived experiences navigating both women's music and jazz spaces can be heard through a sonic seesawing on their albums *Call It Jazz* and *Deuce*. While *Call It Jazz* demonstrates a sonic seesawing between tracks, the sonic seesawing on *Deuce* is seen more across sides of the LP and the final track on each side. On *Call It Jazz*, though not jazz standards, the arrangements of the opening tracks "Willing" by Gil Scott-Heron and "Call It Jazz" by Janet Small trick listeners into thinking Alive!'s *Call It Jazz* is a typical jazz album, albeit with non-standard compositions.⁵² However, tracks three and four, "Show Me The Way" by percussionist Carolyn Brandy and "Step By Step" by Mary Watkins, suggest otherwise, feeling more stylistic of the women's music genre. Their slower tempos and heartfelt lyrics make the listener feel like they've stepped out of a jazz club and into the women-only audiences of the NWMF. The fifth track, "Wild Women Don't Get the Blues" by Ida Cox, has listeners back into the world of jazz with a heavy-hitting blues full of deep emotion. This is followed by another Small original, "Greeting Song," which transports listeners to a Broadway performance, and "Loving You" by Barbara Borden (drums) and Susanne Vincenza (bass), which begins similarly to "Greeting Song," before quickly transitioning into a double-time swing. The seventh track, "Golden River/Golden Dream," by Small, Julie Homi, and Rhiannon (vocalist), takes listeners on another journey to a soundscape that straddles avant garde jazz and women's music. The lyrics, which reference themes common in spiritual feminist circles, is juxtaposed with dissonant harmonies and experimental instrumental sounds. The album finishes with "Too Bad," a bluesy gospel groove by Vincenza and Rhiannon whose lyrics once again find listeners back in the women's music tradition, and "Heaven Is In Your Mind," by June Millington, whose themes of love and community are accompanied by Small's jazzy licks on the Rhodes. The tracks on Alive!'s *Call It*

⁵² During this period, standard jazz would likely be considered hard bop or be bop, especially considering the rise of jazz fusion and jazz rock.

Jazz constantly seesaw between genres, alternating between straight-ahead jazz, women's music, blues, and Broadway-like styles. Each track demonstrates Alive!'s ability to perform in multiple styles and reflects the multiple musical spaces they inhabited. The album is cohesive in the sense that it reflects the identity of Alive! but generates a mild sonic disorientation to some listeners in its seesawing between genres.

Similarly, Deuce's *Deuce* is a combination of Latin jazz, instrumental funk/disco, jazz fusion, women's music, and quintessential 80s pop. The opening track "Partly Sonny," is a joyful and upbeat instrumental Latin composition by Fineberg. Dedicated to saxophonist Sonny Rollins, the track features a doubled unison melody from Fineberg and bassist Seth Glassman, with a countermelody from Seeling on flugelhorn. The atmosphere changes from tropical beaches to 80s smooth jazz with the second track "Smooth Move," a funk-like composition by Seeling somewhat reminiscent of George Benson's "Breezin'." The next track "Texas Pearl" by Fineberg dedicated to Janis Joplin, features a bluesy harmony, gritty melodic delivery, and laid-back tempo pulling the listeners into a relaxed and groovin' state. "Texas Pearl" provides brief moments of surprise during momentary fusion-like harmonic transitions. "No Pain, No Gain," a Fineberg composition and the last track on side one of the LP, is 80s pop meets women's music themes. Vocalist Laura Theodore sings out the chorus "They say No Pain, No Gain/You got to stay alive/ I say No Pay, No Way/ You know we women got to fight to survive."⁵³ With themes of women's equal pay and survival, "No Pain, No Gain" directs listeners towards Deuce's feminist identity. Side two of the LP starts with the fast-paced jazz fusion-pop track "Blackout" by pianist Julie Homi. With an addictive groove, "Blackout" shows off both Homi's compositional and impressive piano skills, as well as the breadth in Fineberg and Seeling's horn

⁵³ Deuce, *Deuce*, Redwood Records, 1986, LP.

playing. “Love Stings,” another Fineberg composition, is a clear homage to the style and themes of women’s music, featuring Teresa Trull on vocals belting out “Love stings like an arrow/ Love cuts like a knife.”⁵⁴ Bringing us back to Deuce’s jazz roots is Seeling’s “Chevre” featuring a Cuban montuno and virtuosic solos from Seeling and Homi. The album seesaws once again with “Watersounds” by Fineberg. A return to the smooth jazz-fusion sounds of “Smooth Move,” Fineberg’s flute solo amplifies the overall aesthetic. The last track of the album, “Bodybuilder” by Fineberg, is another 80s pop rock track like “No Pain, No Gain.” With the verse “Her body is solid/ So strong and so lean/ She moves like a tiger/ She’s a muscle machine,” and the chorus “She’s a bodybuilder” accompanied by shouts of “Pump it up/ Push, push,” Deuce show how they feel about women.⁵⁵

Like *Call It Jazz*, *Deuce* exemplifies Deuce’s lived experience navigating multiple genres and musical spaces. An NEA-funded album project, Fineberg and Seeling’s impressive compositional skills and superb instrumental playing are featured across the album in various different sonic territories. *Call It Jazz* and *Deuce* both perform a sonic seesawing, seesawing between genres on every track. The albums are simultaneously cohesive and disorienting to any listener unfamiliar with the ensemble’s musical backgrounds and women’s music. The type of sonic seesawing performed on *Call It Jazz* and *Deuce* can also be heard on Mary Watkins’s *Something Moving*. In the next section, I explore how Watkins’s sonic seesawing and genre of refusal exist on both a micro and macro scale not seen with *Alive!* and *Deuce*, demonstrating the radical ways jazzwomen’s musical careers refused genre.

Mary Watkins

⁵⁴ Deuce, *Deuce*.

⁵⁵ Deuce, *Deuce*.

Mary Watkins was born in 1939 in Denver, Colorado. Growing up, Watkins studied classical piano, but was immersed in jazz, spiritual, and popular music forms. In 1972, she graduated from Howard University with a degree in classical composition. During her tenure in Washington D.C., Watkins performed in the local jazz scene and was the musical director of Ebony Impromptu, a Black theater company.⁵⁶ She eventually found herself in Los Angeles, where she met Holly Near and was introduced to Olivia Records. Watkins was soon immersed in the women's music circuit in the Bay Area working as a recording musician, composer, and arranger for various women's music labels. During this period, Watkins recorded three albums: *Something Moving* with Olivia Records in 1978, *Winds of Change* with Palo Alto Records in 1981, and *Spiritsongs* with Redwood Records in 1985.⁵⁷ In less than 10 years, Watkins recorded three drastically different albums with three different record labels, two of which were women's music labels. *Something Moving*, *Winds of Change*, and *Spiritsongs* represent the expansiveness of Watkins's musical abilities and aspirations, and her desire to compose music on her own terms.

Watkins's first album, *Something Moving*, is a showcase of soul, musicianship, community, and radical dreams. The liner notes describe Watkins's approach on *Something Moving* as

leaning towards jazz and pop, having a lifelong affinity for the classical, holding memories of the hymns she accompanied as a child, she interweaves these elements. The music she shares with us is familiar in that it comes of a cultural heritage we share, but the ways in which she combines the varying forms creates a new sound that touches us in new ways.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ "Artist Biography," Box 7, Mary Watkins, Women's Music Archive records and collected music, Sophia Smith Collection of Women's History, Smith College Special Collections, Northampton, MA.

⁵⁷ Mary Watkins, *Something Moving*, Mary Watkins, Olivia Records, 1978, LP; *Winds of Change*, Mary Watkins, Palo Alto Records, 1981, LP; *Spiritsongs*, Mary Watkins, Redwood Records, 1985, LP.

⁵⁸ Watkins, *Something Moving*.

The liner notes indicate how Watkins's music is influenced by various genres. Although many of the sounds are familiar to listeners, the combination of jazz, pop, classical, and church music result in a musical aesthetic unique to Watkins. *Something Moving* includes seven original compositions, with three vocal and four instrumental tracks. The tracks "Yesterday's Children," "Brick Hut," and "Leaving All the Shadows Behind" are heavily rooted in the popular soul and rhythm & blues style of the period, while the instrumental pieces "Back Rap," "A Chording to the People," "Witches' Revenge," and "I Hear Music" all include improvisatory aspects and can be loosely described as jazz compositions.⁵⁹ The vocal tracks on *Something Moving* alternate with the instrumental tracks creating a sonic seesawing between genres, and as I discuss below, can be understood as a micro example of a queer genre of refusal. Although not sequential, the opening track "Yesterday's Children," and the sixth track, "Witches' Revenge," best represent *Something Moving*'s sonic seesawing and Watkins's musical identity because of their clear aesthetic and compositional contrast.

Something Moving opens with a composition that is familiar to listeners and reminiscent of the shared cultural heritage referenced in the liner notes. An upbeat and joyful R&B song, "Yesterday's Children" begins with a festive low tom statement from drummer Linda Tillery. Joy Julk's funky bass line drives the groove forming a rock-solid foundation for Watkins's (Rhodes) and Jerene Jackson's (electric guitar) harmonic accompaniment. Supporting the rhythm section groove is a disco-sounding string section and June Millington jamming out on tambourine. Gwen Avery's rich and soulful voice soon enters singing the lines, "Isn't it strange how people define themselves/ Tryin' to please a machine that robs and shelves them/ Well, whatever happened to the trust that binds us/ Giving the best we have of who we are."⁶⁰ Avery's

⁵⁹ Watkins, *Something Moving*.

⁶⁰ Watkins, *Something Moving*.

call receives the response “Giving the best/ Giving the best/Giving the best of who we are,” from Avery, Watkins, and Tillery on background vocals, a tight harmony straight out of a Motown recording.⁶¹ Avery continues with the second verse “It’s a doggone shame some people won’t look inside/ Instead they spend their time watchin’ you and I/ They say we’re a danger, corrupting their young ones/ But they’re livin’ in fear of the truth, the need for change.” In the gaps of Avery’s verses, Watkins’s string arrangement adds texture and a power that pushes forward Juk’s rock solid bass line. The entire ensemble exudes joy, their expressiveness conveying the message of the song. The first two lines of the fourth and last verse starts with “It’s a crime, it’s an evil, dangerous thing/ To stifle the gift of love and the joy it surely brings.” The poetics of Watkins’s lyrics speak of a fear of love and difference. The lyrics are ambiguous; she could be speaking about racial inequality, specifically her experience of being a Black woman in the US, but since she is recording with Olivia Records, a lesbian-separatist label, Watkins could also be speaking directly about her own experiences as a Black lesbian, an identity shared with many of the other women on the album. A catchy and provocative opening track, “Yesterday’s Children” is a sonic and lyrical representation of Watkins’s musical and personal identity as a Black lesbian in the 1970s.

The sixth track, “Witches’ Revenge,” is quite different to “Yesterday’s Children.” An instrumental track on the second side of the album, “Witches’ Revenge” feels more reminiscent of an experimental jazz composition than an upbeat R&B song. The track starts with dissonant Rhodes chords from Watkins and interspersed echoey woodblock rattles from Tillery, which create an eerie and esoteric atmosphere. After setting the stage for a surrealist adventure, Tillery

⁶¹ Not only did Watkins grow up during the peak of Hitsville USA’s Motown success, but she played Rhodes on Stephani Mill’s 1976 album *Stephanie Mills* recorded with Motown Records. “Mary Watkins Credits, Redwood Records,” Mary Watkins, Box 7, Women’s Music Archive records and collected music, Sophia Smith Collection of Women’s History, Smith College Special Collections, Northampton, MA.

switches to a high-hat rhythm and Julks and Jackson join, establishing a hard driving jazz fusion groove. Watkins soon enters with a simple repetitive melody on Rhodes, which is enhanced by her own short responses on a mini-Moog synthesizer. Bonnie Kovaleff soon enters to start off the solo section with an adventurous and angry trumpet solo with dramatic bends and scoops. She is shortly followed by Jackson whose heavily distorted guitar adds a new texture and feeling of revenge to the composition. Experimenting with different harmonies and energies, Watkins follows Jackson's solo jumping back and forth between the Rhodes and mini-Moog, often reaching for crunchy harmonies and theatric sounds. The solo section smoothly transitions back into the opening groove, restating the melody with the addition of "rumbles and plucks" from Watkins and Millington.⁶² As the melody fades out to end the track, Watkins leaves functional harmony behind instead scattering spooky augmented chords behind the rhythm section.

"Witches' Revenge" presents a jazz fusion composition with hints of avant garde harmonies and themes connected to radical feminist movements and women's anger. Completely different to "Yesterday's Children," "Witches' Revenge" speaks to Watkins's jazz skills and complex musical background, as well as an anger that may not have been afforded to her as a Black woman during the 1970s.

"Yesterday's Children" and "Witches' Revenge" are drastically different compositions. One is an uplifting vocal soul composition while the other is an angry esoteric jazz fusion track. Despite not being sequential on the album, these two songs represent the sonic seesawing that happens between every track on *Something Moving*—from vocal R&B to instrumental jazz. This sonic seesawing demonstrates the non-cohesive sonic narrative of *Something Moving*. The

⁶² The liner notes for "Witches' Revenge" list Watkins and Millington as "rumbles and pluck" referencing some of the additional sounds in the background during the melody's reinstatement. *Something Moving*, Mary Watkins, Olivia Records, 1978, LP.

album's seesawing between genres reflects a refusal to conform to one musical identity and instead represents the many musical and individual identities Watkins had while navigating both women's music and jazz spaces. Both jazz and women's music albums usually have a uniformity and predictability to them. Typically, although songs are individually unique, together, the songs on an album can be identified as following one genre or one group's sonic identity, and even genre transgression can be understood through genre categories. For instance, *Heavy Weather* (1977) by the Weather Report, a jazz-fusion group including the likes of Wayne Shorter and Jaco Pastorius, was clearly marked as jazz-fusion by *Down Beat* and listening publics when it was released.⁶³ *Heavy Weather* was sonically similar to Weather Report's previous album *Black Market* (1976) and later album *Mr. Gone* (1978), showing a clear sonic progression.⁶⁴ The album was extremely well received, reaching number thirty on the *Billboard* pop charts, and was described as an album that broke genre barriers in jazz and pop.⁶⁵ As a jazz-fusion band, Weather Report was celebrated for transgressing genre boundaries, something they could do because of their status as successful *male* jazz figures. If a similar sounding album were released by a jazzwoman or all-women group, the album likely would not have received acclaim, and the musicians would *not* have been celebrated for breaking similar genre barriers. Additionally, most jazz albums include jazz standards, especially a jazz musician's first recorded album—but *Something Moving*, Watkins's first album, is all originals. For comparison, Wayne Shorter, whose albums primarily consisted of his own compositions, still included a jazz standard, "Mack the Knife" by Kurt Weil, on his first album *Introducing Wayne Shorter* (1959).⁶⁶ Jazzwomen

⁶³ Curt Bianchi, "Heavy Weather," Weather Report: The Annotated Discography, last modified November 26, 2017, <https://www.weatherreportdiscography.org/heavy-weather/>.

⁶⁴ Weather Report, *Black Market*, Columbia Records, 1976, LP; Weather Report, *Heavy Weather*, Columbia Records, 1977, LP; Weather Report, *Mr. Gone*, Columbia Records, 1978, LP.

⁶⁵ Bianchi, "Heavy Weather."

⁶⁶ Wayne Shorter, *Introducing Wayne Shorter*, Vee-Jay Records, 1959, LP.

recording in women's music, like Watkins, *Alive!* and *Deuce*, rarely, if ever, included jazz standards on their albums. Watkins does not follow hegemonic album expectation but instead forms a type of musical dissonance. She refuses cohesion and harmony both musically and thematically, negating genre and formulating a queer genre of refusal. Further, Watkins's negation is radical due to her position as a Black lesbian woman, especially within women's music, which is historically perceived as a white space.

Watkins, *Alive!*, and *Deuce* all performed at numerous women's jazz festivals and women's music festivals, performed and recorded with other women's music and jazz performers, and recorded albums with women's music labels. The hybrid nature of these musicians' careers and the varying musical spaces they navigated is reflected in their recorded works. Their sonic seesawing between genres represents a refusal to conform to one identity and instead represents the many musical and individual identities the women had from navigating both women's music and jazz communities. The artists straddling of two contradictory spaces—jazz and women's music—required Watkins, *Alive!*, and *Deuce* to think non-traditionally about the way they constructed their albums and performed their musical identities. The sonic nature of their albums is not simply a matter of being innovative or a reflection of their musical influences, but a refusal to uphold genre expectations. Further, considering *Alive!*'s inability to be identified as jazz by record stores, and the lack of coverage each of these musicians received in major jazz magazines, these women's albums do not seem to have been circulated in mainstream jazz spaces and only in women's music and jazzwomen spaces. I suggest that *Something Moving*, *Call It Jazz*, and *Deuce* can be categorized as not jazz or women's music, but a queer genre of refusal reflecting the sonic and contextual multiplicity of the artists music and careers.

Although Watkins, Alive!, and Deuce all constructed their albums with a sonic seesawing and can be understood within a framework of a genre of refusal, Watkins's *Something Moving*, which was recorded in 1978, can be understood as the first example of a queer genre of refusal. Additionally, Watkins's queer genre of refusal can be understood on a macro scale beyond *Something Moving*. The three albums she recorded during her tenure in the women's music community are drastically different from one another. *Something Moving*, recorded with Olivia Records, presents itself as a soul R&B and small ensemble jazz recording. *Winds of Change*, recorded with the jazz label Palo Alto Records is an NEA grant-funded Latin jazz big band album. Although recorded outside of the women's music circuit, *Winds of Change* features bassist Joy Julks from *Something Moving*, Olivia Records founder Ginny Berson as a concert producer, Linda Tillery as the emcee, and the Maiden Voyage Big Band, an all-women big band who performed at WJF the same year as Watkins in 1980.⁶⁷ And Watkins's third album, *Spiritsongs*, recorded with Redwood Records, is a solo piano album. Although *Winds of Change* (Palo Alto) and *Spiritsongs* (Redwood) do not include a sonic seesawing like *Something Moving*, when put in conversation with *Something Moving* they demonstrate a macro-scale sonic seesawing.

Together, the three albums can be understood as a type of cacophony. As Jack Halberstam writes in the introduction of Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Studies*,

The disordered sounds that we refer to as cacophony will always be cast as “extra-musical,” as Moten puts it, precisely because we hear something in them that reminds us

⁶⁷ *Winds of Change* credits women's music players, jazzwomen, who Watkins likely met through the WJF, and local jazzmen. The album credits almost 40 individuals and is a mix of men and women from different music scenes. This album can individually be understood as a musical citational practice where Watkins includes lesser-known musicians from smaller musical scenes in a government funded recording project. This in and of itself feels like an individual refusal to be comprehensive to specific musical communities. Mary Watkins, *Winds of Change*, Palo Alto Records, 1981, LP; “Jazzwomen '80,” Women's Music Festivals, 1977-1987, Folder 15, Box 16, Leonard Feather Collection, International Jazz Collections, University of Idaho, Moscow, Idaho.

that our desire for harmony is arbitrary and in another world, harmony would sound incomprehensible. Listening to cacophony and noise tells us that there is a wild beyond to the structures we inhabit and that inhabit us.⁶⁸

There is nothing in any of Watkins's music that I would describe as musically cacophonous in a traditional sense, but the hybridity and multiplicity of her first three recorded works create a disorientation when considered as a map of her musical identity.⁶⁹ Like the individual songs on *Something Moving*, each album is sonically and materially different; each is recorded by a different record label, has a different musical conglomeration, reflects different genres, includes different supporting musicians, and exists in the world in different capacities. Halberstam refers to cacophonous noise as an indicator of a wild beyond. I position Halberstam's "wild beyond" as representative of a queer futurity, as defined by Muñoz. Muñoz explains in *Cruising Utopia* that queerness should be seen as "something that is not yet here," a combined realization of a past, present, and future.⁷⁰ He goes on to explain that, "Queerness as utopian formation is a formation based on an economy of desire and desiring. This desire is always directed at the thing that is not yet here, objects and moments that burn with anticipation and promise."⁷¹ The sonic seesawing in *Something Moving* and the macro seesawing Watkins's albums demonstrate can be understood as a queer futurity, embodying her past, present, and future, and signaling to the possibility of a musical world and genre that is not yet but could be.

There are small connecting features between the albums that reflect Watkins's commitment to her personal and musical past, present, and future. As mentioned previously in my analysis of *Something Moving*, the album reflects multiple musical genres from different

⁶⁸ Jack Halberstam, "Introduction: The Wild Beyond," *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Studies* (Minor Compositions, 2013), 7.

⁶⁹ The Merriam-Webster online dictionary defines cacophony as "1: harsh or jarring sound, dissonance," and "2: an incongruous or chaotic mixture, a striking combination." "Cacophony," Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, accessed December 19th, 2025, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cacophony>.

⁷⁰ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 22.

⁷¹ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 26.

moments in her life: classical, jazz, R&B, and church. Additionally, Watkins wrote in the liner notes of *Something Moving* that

This album is dedicated to: My daughter, Sharron, who says ‘Not bad for you, Mom!’ My mother Evelyn... My first music teacher, Edith Johnson... My special friend, Laraine, who said ‘You can’ when I wondered if I really should... The church of my childhood... And to all those relatives and friends, coworkers who have helped, inspired, and encouraged me throughout.⁷²

Here, Watkins directly points to her past and present as being essential to the creation of *Something Moving*. Many of the women on *Something Moving*, like Tillery and Julks, are on *Winds of Change*, along with women Watkins met at WJF, Olivia Records, and her “special friend” Laraine. *Winds of Change* is connected to the past and points to a futurity where women and men from all genres can collaborate on exciting musical projects. And although *Spiritsongs* takes a step away from musical collaboration, the tracks once again reflect Watkins’s musical past and present, as well as a future of musical exploration. After her stint in women’s music, Watkins returned to her classical roots, composing three operas: *Queen Clara* (2005), *Dark River: The Fannie Lou Hamer Story* (2009), and *Emmett Till: The Opera* (2019).⁷³ Watkins’s operas all tell the stories of individuals—Clara Barton, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Emmett Till—whose histories are often erased. These connections between Watkins’s albums and career show a continuous thread of a past/present/future while simultaneously creating a dissonance by mixing the worlds of women’s music, jazz, and classical together. Unlike Watkins, Alive! and Deuce’s recorded arcs do not present a similar cacophony. Across her career, Watkins performed a wild beyond that is cacophonous and queer, and as Halberstam suggests, helps us imagine a musical world beyond the ones we expect and inhabit.

⁷² Watkins, *Something Moving*.

⁷³ “Operas Composed by Mary D. Watkins,” Operas, Mary D. Watkins, accessed April 2, 2026, <https://marydwatkins.com/operas/>.

Watkins possesses a sonic fingerprint that is recognizable if one is familiar with her early recorded works and extended musical career. However, if *Something Moving*, *Winds of Change*, and *Spiritsongs* were listened to individually, it would be difficult to know that Watkins was the artist behind all three albums. *Something Moving*, *Winds of Change*, and *Spiritsongs* refuse the coherency of structures and timelines. Her dissonance, cacophony, and refusal can be heard on multiple registers and offers a different perspective on the way women navigate musical spaces. Understanding her work as a refusal to conform to a single genre's standard helps contextualize her importance in women's music and jazz histories. Using a queer genre of refusal as a framework for understanding Watkins's musical career and influence can help scholars to understand and contextualize other musicians whose careers and music negate canonical jazz narratives. Whether on a micro or macro scale, Watkins, Alive! and Deuce all perform a sonic seesawing participating in a queer genre of refusal. Their negation of the musical normative and push towards queerness demonstrate a musical queer futurity of what was, what is, and what jazz can be.

Conclusion

A queer genre of refusal is a framework that can help contextualize musicians who are dismissed from mainstream music narratives and discourses because of their sexuality, musical innovations, and multiplicity—musicians whose radical dreams are cacophonous. As my analysis demonstrates, a queer genre of refusal helps contextualize Watkins, Alive! and Deuce within women's music and jazzwomen narratives. A queer genre of refusal can also be understood as part of a larger narrative, contemporary and historical, of jazzwomen negating and refusing music industry and jazz expectations. Understanding the nuanced ways jazzwomen have defined

their musical paths will allow us to work towards creating more inclusive narratives and deconstructing restrictive musical genres. Frameworks like a queer genre of refusal allow musicians outside of the canon to be taught in ways that value their distinct identities and musical paths without boxing them into standard historical narratives. How would music histories change if we classified musicians less by how they can or cannot fit within genre boxes and more by the radical ways they refuse genre? How do we talk about jazzwomen whose careers are atypical and misunderstood? How would the narratives of innovative and radical Black women musicians be told if we celebrated their cacophony? Utilizing a queer genre of refusal would allow us to answer these questions and better understand the innovative and unique musical careers of Watkins, Alive!, Deuce, and numerous other jazzwomen.

Conclusion: Locating Other Improvised Spaces

In 1996, jazz pianist and educator Dr. Billy Taylor founded the Mary Lou Williams Women in Jazz Festival (MLWWJF) at the Kennedy Center in Washington D.C.¹ Alongside the New York Public Library's Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture's Women's Jazz Festival (1992), the MLWWJF was one of the longest running women's jazz festivals.² Both festivals formed in the 1990s in connection with a major institution, a fact that has shown to be an essential element to the long-term sustainability of women's jazz festivals. Another Washington D.C. women's jazz festival, the Washington Women in Jazz Festival, run by Amy K. Bormet and independent from an institution, has run for sixteen years through donations and grants, similar to WJF and Salute. The MLWWJF, like its predecessor festivals WJF and Salute, featured and uplifted jazzwomen of different generations. But in 2013, the festivals' organizers decided to remove the word "women" from the festival name, renaming it the Mary Lou Williams Jazz Festival and programing all-male ensembles alongside jazzwomen.³ In her article "From *Women-in-Jazz* to *Gender-and-Jazz*: Jazz Feminism from 2017 to 2019," jazz scholar Jenna Przybysz notes how

Festival officials decided to rebrand the festival because they felt that the word "women" was too limiting and, more importantly, argued that women musicians "proliferated at all levels of jazz" since the establishment of the festival...The decision to rebrand was prompted by the festival officials' beliefs that women-centered festivals were no longer necessary to reverse gender disparity in the male-dominated field of jazz.⁴

¹ Michael J. West, "The Mary Lou Williams Women in Jazz Festival," *JazzTimes* (August 3, 2024), <https://www.jazztimes.com/reviews/live/the-mary-lou-williams-women-in-jazz-festival/?v=0b3b97fa6688>.

² Every New York Public Library link I tried to access for information on the Schomburg's Women's Jazz Festival was unavailable. "Mar 23: 2026 Women's Jazz Festival: Kandace Springs," Upstairs NYC, written March 1, 2026, <https://www.upstairsnyc.org/post/mar-23-2026-women-s-jazz-festival-kandace-springs>.

³ Jenna Przybysz, "From *Women-in-Jazz* to *Gender-and-Jazz*: Jazz Feminism from 2017 to 2019," *The Journal of Jazz Studies* 16, no 2 (November 2025): 199-225.

⁴ Przybysz, "From *Women-in-Jazz* to *Gender-and-Jazz*," 199.

Przybysz continues, explaining that the decision was defended by the *male* jazz director, Jason Moran, a decision that did not reflect the ongoing gender inequities faced by jazzwomen.⁵ Since the decision in 2013, the festival has continued to celebrate Mary Lou Williams's legacy, but shifted focus away from her identity as a jazzwoman and eliminated the festival's original women-centered vision. Despite the claim that jazzwomen no longer need women's jazz festivals to combat gender inequities, major gender inequities still exist in the jazz community.⁶

In March 2026, the Schomburg Center's Women's Jazz Festival held its 34th annual festival and the Washington Women in Jazz Festival held its 16th annual festival. The MLWJF, like past years, should be set to run its 28th festival in May 2026; however, the fate of the MLWJF lays in limbo. In July 2025, Moran, the Kennedy Center's Artistic Director of Jazz since 2011, stepped down from his role, and in September 2025, Kevin Struthers, the center's Jazz Coordinator since 1996, was fired.⁷ In March 2026, amidst women's history month, the Kennedy Center announced it would be closed for two-years starting July 2026. A search for the MLWJF on the Kennedy Center website results only in calendar notices from the 2025 festival and no results for the 2026 festival, and there are no events listed on the calendar. With no official announcement, it appears as if the Mary Lou Williams Jazz Festival has been cancelled. First, through the removal of MLWJF's women-centered mission, and second, through the festival's discrete cancellation, the MLWJF, along with its history, has been erased.

As this thesis has demonstrated, the MLWJF is not the first instance of jazzwomen being erased. Jazzwomen, normative and nonnormative alike, have consistently been erased and left

⁵ Przybysz, "From *Women-in-Jazz* to *Gender-and-Jazz*," 199-200.

⁶ For more information on gender inequities in jazz, see Lara Pellegrinelli's 2025 "Jazz Counts: Measuring the Jazz Faculty Gap in Higher Education," a report on the percentage of women higher education jazz instructors. Lara Pellegrinelli, "Jazz Counts: measuring the Jazz Faculty Gap in Higher Education," from the Berklee Institute of Jazz and Gender Justice (June 2025).

⁷ David R. Adler, "Things Fall Apart: Purging Jazz At The Kenedy Center," *JazzTimes*, written September 17, 2025, <https://www.jazztimes.com/blog/things-fall-apart-purging-jazz-at-the-kennedy-center/?v=0b3b97fa6688>.

out of jazz history because of their gender, sexuality, and refusal of genre expectations. The Women's Music Cultural Movement has been erased from feminist histories and broader music histories because of its lesbian-separatist roots and complicated racial and trans exclusive narratives. However, the histories and narratives of marginalized musicians are essential to history and in the current social and political climate, in which the words "feminist" and "women" are cause enough for the removal of jazz scholarship from a government website, reclaiming those narratives is of utmost importance.⁸

I began this conclusion on a somber note to highlight the importance of continued research on the intersections of jazzwomen spaces and the Women's Music Cultural Movement. These intersections demonstrate the complex interconnectedness of musical communities. By looking at ephemera and non-jazz spaces for flickers of jazzwomen involvement, a multitude of jazzwomen narratives can be recovered and reclaimed. Jazzwomen's narratives are important, not just for the progress of jazz and its history, but for the advancement of all gender minorities in music. When jazz looks towards feminism and feminism looks towards jazz, a jazz feminist futurity can unfold.

The status of the MLWJF lays in limbo, but the future of jazzwomen's success does not. If jazz scholarship, women's music scholarship, and music scholarship broadly continue to utilize methodologies developed by marginalized communities to look between the lines for erased histories and narratives, then jazz can continue to provide a radical hope for what the future can be. Space is the place and *improvised spaces* are jazz feminist futurities

⁸ In 2025, after Trump's inauguration, the U.S. government began removing anything from government websites that included words like women, feminist, gender, etc. During an independent study with my advisor on gender, sexuality, and jazz, we discovered that Sherrie Tucker's 2004 "A Feminist Perspective on New Orleans Jazzwomen" had been taken down from the U.S. National Parks Services website because it contained the word feminist and women. This moment was documented in my advisor Dr. Kelsey Klotz's "Letter from the Guest Editor" in the *Journal of Jazz Studies* special issue on gender and jazz. Kelsey Klotz, "State of the Field: Jazz and Gender: Letter from the Guest Editor," *The Journal of Jazz Studies* 16, no 1 (June 2025): 1-3.

Appendix 1; Timeline

1973:

- *Roe v Wade* (passed, overturned in 2022)
- Holly Near's *Hang In There* (Redwood Records)
- U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War ends

1974:

- Meg Christian's *I Know You Know* (Olivia Records)
- [May/June] 1st National Women's Music Festival (NWMF)

1975:

- Chris Williamson's *The Changer and the Changed* (Olivia Records)
- [June] 2nd NWMF
- End of the Vietnam War

1976:

- Bebe K'Roche's *Bebe K'Roche* (Olivia Records)
- [June] 3rd NWMF
- [August] 1st Michigan Womyn's Music Festival (MichFest)

1977:

- *Lesbian Concentrate* (Olivia Records)
- [June] 4th NWMF
- [August] 2nd MichFest

1978:

- Mary Watkins's *Something Moving* (Olivia Records)
- [March] 1st Kansas City Women's Jazz Festival (WJF)
- [June] 1st UJC's Salute to Women in Jazz Festival (Salute to Women)
- [June] 5th NWMF
- [August] 3rd MichFest

1979:

- [March] 2nd WJF
- [June] 2nd Salute to Women
- [June] 6th NWMF
- [August] 4th MichFest
- [November] Mini Women's Jazz Weekend at Lulu White's in Boston, MA

1980:

- [March] 3rd WJF
- [June] 3rd Salute to Women

- [June] 7th NWMF
- [August] 5th MichFest

1981:

- Alive!'s *Call It Jazz* (Redwood Records)
- [March] 4th WJF
- [April] From Bessie to Billie to Now: A Festival of Women Jazz Artists
- [June] 4th Salute to Women
- [June] 8th NWMF
- [August] 6th MichFest
- Start of the Reagan Administration

1982:

- Mary Watkins's *Winds of Change* (Palo Alto Records)
- [March] 5th WJF
- [June] 5th Salute to Women
- [June] 9th NWMF
- [August] 7th MichFest

1983:

- [March] 6th WJF
- [June] 6th Salute to Women
- [June] 10th NWMF
- [August] 8th MichFest

1984:

- [June] 7th Salute to Women
- [June] 11th NWMF
- [August] 9th MichFest

1985:

- Mary Watkins's *Spiritsongs* (Redwood Records)
- [March] 7th and final WJF
- [June] 8th Salute to Women
- [June] 12th NWMF
- [August] 10th MichFest

1986:

- Deuce's *Deuce* (Redwood Records)
- [June] 9th Salute to Women
- [June] 13th NWMF
- [August] 11th MichFest

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