

Female Band Workshops...

... or what can be done to increase the number of women in Jazz

First some statistics to get a picture of the situation of women in Jazz: At the Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts we have an average of 15% of women who study Jazz, singers included. If you count the instrumentalists only, the number drops to around 5%. We have comparable numbers at the other Music Universities in Switzerland. The Sisters in Jazz Association in the USA speaks of 3% female students. The same picture, as we all know, is seen on stage.

The reasons for this are complex and rooted in the socio-cultural history of women and the roles and opportunities available to them in musical performance arts.

Choosing an instrument, for example, is still heavily gender-biased. Girls on flute, violin and voice, boys on trumpet, bass and drums. The choice - which instrument a girl or a boy plays - has a lot to do with common stereotypes. The determining factors are tone colour, the possible sound volume, the quota of electronics used with a specific instrument and the body expression that emerges while playing. The so-called 'female instruments' are not often found in Jazz music and so the musicians who play these instruments are often directed towards one specific category of music.

Another reason for the paucity of women in Jazz can be ascribed to the fact that girls refer more to responsible adults (such as parents, teachers, music teachers) than boys do. In Switzerland, music teachers very often still have a classical background. If girls don't search a way besides the official music school (and usually they don't) they will rarely get the chance to play Pop and Jazz music. And if they decide to become a professional musician, it becomes almost inevitable that they must choose the classical route. Where by now we have slightly more female students than male.

Also, parents have a strong influence on their daughters. As long as Jazz is seen as wild, aggressive and provocative they most likely will not encourage their daughters to choose that path. I would be the last person to say girls shouldn't be wild, aggressive and provocative, but we still live in a world that prefers girls to be nice and acquiescent, at least Switzerland does.

The big question is: Is Jazz wild, aggressive and provocative or are we just seeing half the picture? Isn't Jazz much more than that? To play the music well, isn't it essential to be a very good listener and communicator for the sake of the group interplay? Isn't having a sense of creativity and aesthetics very important in order to keep solos interesting? And isn't improvisation a huge opportunity for self expression? All of these aforementioned qualities are female stereotypes. And let us not forget a final important question: in whose interest is it to keep the image of Jazz male? I leave the answer to that question up to you.

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Another reason for the absence of women in Jazz is the internal and external attribution. In an article by Dorothee Alfermann entitled 'Frauen in der Attributionsforschung: Die fleissige Liese und der kluge Hans' (I couldn't find it in English, I'm sorry) she describes how boys and men attribute success solely to their own efforts. And conversely the reasons for failure are often searched for and explained by external factors - such as bad luck, bad timing, the wrong team and so on. Nothing to do with their lack of qualities. Girls and women on the other hand take the opposite approach. Since improvisation by its very nature is an activity that contains a high possibility of failure, and since girls are conditioned to believe that to be successful is to please others and to blame failure on themselves, we can see that the act of improvisation is very tough for girls. But without improvisation there is no Jazz.

Some important decisions (choosing an instrument, playing in Bands, career aspirations) are made at an age when young people are very much occupied with finding their sexual identity. At this age it is important to be different from the opposite sex. Jazz and Pop are still largely male dominated and it takes a girl with a lot of independence and confidence to enter this male dominated domain and choose this music for herself. Many women begin to play Jazz at a later stage of their lives, when the gender role has been formed and is safe. But unfortunately, entering the music at this stage is often too late for someone who is considering a professional career.

A final point to consider: Women have a lack of female role models in the world of professional Jazz, and this has been true historically as well as in the present day. And even if women are playing they're often operating from a very low public profile, are rarely mentioned in the various jazz medias, and consequently not known by a larger public and very often not known even by other Jazz musicians.

Despite all these reasons, and of course there are more than I described now, there were always women who played Jazz, and the number is slowly increasing. We can support this.

While I think it is very important to reflect on all these reasons and to do some serious research about the situation of women in Pop and Jazz music, I find it even more helpful to actually do something. There are a lot of good projects that are very effective in supporting the process of change.

I would like to present one of them to you now. The Female Band Workshops at the Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts.

The target group of these workshops are girls and young women between 13 and 21 years old who have already been playing their instrument for several years. This is the time in their socialisation when the peer group becomes very important and they start with their career aspirations. We decided to do the workshops exclusively for girls and young women, as at this age the single-sex education is helpful in subjects that are dominated by the opposite sex. The weekly rehearsals of two hours each, last for one academic year and end with a public concert. The workshops are lead by female Jazz

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musicians who also act as role models. At this juncture I would like to point out that it is very important that the workshop leaders not only be good musicians, but that they also be interested in the subject of women in Jazz and have a great commitment to the project. The participants in the workshops get the chance to play Jazz and Pop music in a band, learn how to handle the electronics, acquire stage experience and increase both their performance ability and their physical presence. Active participation is very important in our workshops and since the girls and young women decide what kind of music they want to play and each one is responsible for one song, they get a strong sense of empowerment not only for the music but also for other areas in life.

The challenge for the workshop leaders is to get the young women to improvise. In the beginning, the participants quite often prepare their solos at home, write them down and play them exactly as written and planned, just to be sure not to make any mistakes. However the workshop leaders try to help them to accept that mistakes do happen, that these mistakes might even lead to inspiration in some cases, and they encourage them just to do and try out, however it sounds.

We found out, that once they tasted blood, they love to improvise and get a lot of fun out of it.

Another challenge is to get them to really take over responsibility for one song, which means deciding how the song is to be played, who gets the solos etcetera. Their habit of being nice to each other can make it difficult for them to criticize the others and it is hard work for them to get a clear idea of what they want and communicate that in a straightforward way. However it's wonderful to see how the personal shape of every participant increases as the workshop proceeds.

We also found out that the biggest obstacle for them is to actually start attending the workshops. Once they're in it, they usually like it very much. We have several young women who are participating in the workshops for the third and fourth time, with increasing technical abilities on their instrument as well as a better sense of interplay and a gain in stage performance ability. Some of them bring along their own compositions. As the workshops go on, the workshop leaders try to make themselves more and more dispensable as the aim is to make the young ladies as independent as possible so they can start their own band without a leader, or find a place in a mixed band and feel strong and confident enough to fight for their ideas.

I'd like to come back to the topic of the barrier of getting into the workshop. In a survey we made with the participants we found out that, in terms of giving the girls and young women an impetus and encouragement to join the workshops, music teachers are the most important people. Very often the girls think they're not good enough and the affirmation of the teacher that the songs of the workshop can be part of the weekly lesson, helps them to take this step. Of course the parents are also needed in supporting the subject, as they pay the fee for the workshop. And it helps if a good friend plays in the same workshop. But the music teacher seems to be the most important person in encouraging the young women to join, and this leads me to another possibility of action to change the fact that very few women play Jazz.

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At the Music Universities, which offer studies for music pedagogy, we have the possibility to train the students in gender competences, which means that they develop a sensibility for the different realities boys and girls grow up with, and that it is important to work with this. And here I want to point out that it is as important for boys as it is for girls to dismantle the stereotypes, because boys also have their own restrictions given by society, as well as girls - only in other fields (playing harp, caring for babies, having no aim to be a bread-earner, wearing skirts, being tender, dancing ballet, disapproving of violence). Gender competence also means that the students are aware of their own gender background and with what stereotypes they work. Our students are the future music teachers who will go out there and can really change something with a more aware approach, either in their influence in the process of choosing an instrument and leading the kids to more freedom and encouraging the parents to accept that, or in finding ways to get the girls to improvise and play in bands. The University is the best place to start the change that will hopefully begin to happen in the next generation. And it's clear that it helps if there are female teachers as role models working at the universities. Students should come out of universities with the knowledge and awareness that women as well as men can be professional Jazz musicians.

Back to the Female Band Workshops in Lucerne. One could say that the Universities aren't the right places to organize workshops for teenagers and this is probably true, unless you see it as the development of the next generation of students. In Lucerne we're doing this very successful project for the fourth year and since last autumn the music universities of Berne and Zurich are also offering Female Band Workshops. This way, more and more girls and young women get the opportunity to take their first steps in Jazz in a Female Band Workshop and hopefully make the next steps into mixed bands and a life as a professional Jazz musician. The aim is to place similar workshops all over the country, and we are working on a concept to transfer the idea to the public music schools since they usually work with teenagers. It is the Universities that build up the knowledge, that do research and launch innovative new projects. We can transfer these projects to other fields, such as music schools, but also to public schools and youth work.

We would be very glad if the idea would spread throughout Europe. If you need support to develop Workshops, we'll be glad to help. If you already have successful projects to increase the number of women who play Jazz, let us know. We are always interested in new ideas and would love to do some networking!

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