

Swinging Through Spheres: Jazz, Gender, and Mobility.

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I'm like a nurse, a fireman, or a cop on the beat—
they all wear their uniforms to work, and I'm no different.

-Drag Queen RuPaul, *Lettin' It All Hang Out*

During World War II, people living in the United States were experiencing the “extremes of both unprecedented restriction and unprecedented mobility” (Tucker 34). As Sherrie Tucker writes, “At the same time that pleasure driving was banned and gas and tires were rationed, 12 million people left home for military service, and 15 million other Americans moved for other reasons, such as work opportunities to pursue dreams not possible during the Great Depression” (34). Interestingly, despite Jim Crow¹ laws and obligatory domestic duties in the private sphere, members of “all-girl” swing bands (often racially mixed ones) were among the most publicly mobile figures of the 1940s. In her book *Swing Shift*, Tucker reveals the story of female jazz musicians who managed to navigate through a masculine American landscape and penetrate the male-dominated, homosocial world of jazz.

Tucker's project is significant for a number of reasons. First and foremost, *Swing Shift* brings a largely ignored part of jazz history into public discourse. Without letting her own voice or personal bias dominate the narrative, Tucker gives 1940s female jazz musicians a space to tell their history the way they remember it.² Secondly, aside from uncovering and compiling a detailed history of “all-girl” bands, Tucker's examination of the role gender plays in jazz is crucial. Gender is something that has been almost totally overlooked in Jazz Studies until very recently. In fact, the erasure of gender from jazz discourse has made jazz appear strangely genderless. But, as Tucker notes, this is definitely not the case: “The dominant swing texts are not gender neutral (although they pass themselves off as such); they are histories of musical

¹ “Jim Crow” refers to the historical period in 20th century U.S. in which the government actively and violently enforced racial segregation, most notably in the South. Although these laws varied within and between states, to my knowledge, racially mixed female bands would have been considered highly illegal across the board.

² In the 1940s, travel and adventure were associated with a brand of rugged masculinity. Franklin D. Roosevelt's National Parks Project literally projected masculinity onto the American landscape by setting aside land/nature for men to “conquer.” Thus, a band of female jazz musicians zooming around the country in a bus provides us with a striking image: a feminine invasion of what was considered to be masculine territory

men” (6). Thus, Tucker’s focus on the female jazz experience is, I think, a necessary and productive step toward understanding jazz in terms of gender (and gender in terms of jazz). And finally, what is perhaps the most fascinating aspect of *Swing Shift* is that it highlights performances of gender (and race) as a strategic means for mobility.³

This paper seeks to examine the ways in which “all-girl” bands simultaneously perpetuated and subverted racist/patriarchal power structures through performance. In addition, Diane Wood Middlebrook’s *Suits Me: The Double Life of Billy Tipton*, the biography of a biologically female jazz musician who lived as a man, will provide another example of how a very different mode of gender performance was used in a similarly strategic way during the same epoch. By viewing the highly stylized gender performances in these texts through the lens of Judith Butler’s treatment of drag, I will illuminate how a strategic deployment of specific types of masculinities and/or femininities (flexible/malleable gender constructions) can enable personal and social mobility. Most importantly though, my exploration of gender in a jazz context will illustrate gender’s undeniable influence on the way jazz is experienced and consumed.

While male jazz musicians’ careers were put on hold due to enlistment and the draft, World War II opened a unique window of opportunity for female musicians. As Tucker states, “the war affected the women’s bands quite differently than it did the men’s bands...all-woman jazz and swing bands, many of which existed in the prewar years or had players who had been working professionally since the 1920s or 1930s, were suddenly visible and in demand” (16). However, it wasn’t simply their musical abilities that suddenly thrust them into the limelight. The only way for these women to receive public approval or respect was to conform to society’s rigid gender role expectations.⁴ For example, to gain public acceptance as females in the masculine sphere of the jazz world, it was necessary for female musicians to appear ultra-feminized: “wartime gender discourse demanded reassurance that femininity would not be lost...because worker is constructed as masculine, women’s labor must be made to look like leisure or, at least, like a private drama” (47, 57). In other words, women needed to distinguish

³ For the purposes of this project I will focus primarily on gender, although I do want to emphasize that performances of race are equally important in terms of mobility.

⁴ The “Darlings of Rhythm,” a rather rough-looking, masculine female jazz band who managed to get by because of their gritty, “masculine” playing (as opposed to the sweet sounds of other “all-girl” bands) is the only exception that I am aware of here.

themselves from men so that it wouldn't seem like they were trying to replace men. Through performing a hyperbolic femininity, then, they were able to construct a public appearance that was quite separate from the male musicians they really were temporarily replacing:

Smiling, made up, wearing glamorous gowns revealing plenty of bosom, holding shining horns aloft as if the tools of the trade struck female musicians as curious, unfamiliar ornaments—a different presence reassured audiences that women who played instruments associated with men refined their femininity (59).

Unfortunately, this type of gender performance caused many “all-girl” bands to be perceived as spectacles or novelty acts rather than groups of talented musicians. Instead of being valued for their skills or being judged on a plane of their own, these women were seen as simply mimicking or imitating members of a masculine profession.⁵

Although female musicians weren't taken as seriously as male musicians because of their hyper-feminine performances, it was these performances that enabled them to pursue their livelihood. By playing a particular role that appealed to the masses, women in “all-girl” bands were able to achieve enough popularity to continue getting gigs (at least during wartime). And, being hired to play in an “all-girl” band meant more than travel, adventure, and excitement; it meant an escape from domestic life, and often, as Tucker states, an escape “from less desirable situations” (55). Female musicians suddenly had the option to flee from housewifery or menial/oppressive careers. Moreover, playing in “all-girl” bands was a lucrative profession. Thus for many women, putting on makeup and an ostentatious dress seemed like a small price to pay for a career that would open up a world of otherwise impossible opportunities.

However, new opportunities also came with new difficulties and obstacles. For example, during the Jim Crow era, racially mixed “all-girl” bands were in constant danger of being found out and arrested. But again, performance came in handy. These bands often avoided criminal punishment by wearing light or dark makeup to confuse police about their actual racial origins. Tucker writes, “By exploiting police confusion about who was black and who was white, traveling bands with mixed personnel exposed the cracks in Jim Crow” (159). Although racial issues are not my focus for this project, it is clear that “all-girl” bands' performances of both race and gender were a necessary survival tactic, as well as an effective vehicle for mobility.

⁵ Women musicians were never thought of as autonomous individuals; rather, they were constantly compared to their male “counterparts”: “Dozens of woman trumpet players were dubbed ‘the female Louis Armstrong,’ drummers ‘the female Gene Krupa’” (Tucker 6).

I would like to suggest that female jazz musicians' highly stylized performances of race and gender can be likened to drag. As Debra Silverman (quoting Judith Butler) writes:

Drag 'fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity' (337). I believe that this holds in a theoretical sense whether one is a man in drag...or a woman masquerading in femininity. (73)

Silverman suggests that Butler's treatment of drag need not only apply to cross-dressers; rather, drag can describe the performances of a woman or man exaggerating (or downplaying) their own femininity/masculinity. And I would add that performing race, like performing gender, "subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space" and mocks any notion that one's racial identity can be determined simply by the shade of one's skin (73). It seems to me that "all-girl" band members' performances expose the social construction of both race and gender. Judith Butler writes, "as much as drag creates a unified picture of 'woman' (what it's critics often oppose), it also reveals the distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalized...in imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself" (Butler 112). Similarly, although female jazz musicians in the 1940s were perpetuating/naturalizing the conventional ideals of hyper-feminine women and racial purity (in places where integration was forbidden), their stories reveal the flexibility and constructedness of race and gender. These women were able to penetrate masculine/white/homosocial spheres by simply applying makeup, and dressing/behaving in an "appropriate" way. In this sense, their performances allowed them to subvert the traditional racial/hegemonic hierarchy that would have otherwise prevented them from becoming jazz musicians.

As the previous examples have shown, "all-girl" band members' skilled performances were clearly deliberate and purposeful. Tucker states, "In contexts where passing was illegal and dangerous, performer's participation in constructing alternative representations of race and gender was conscious and strategic" (12). Tucker's observation contains echoes of Joan Rivière's 1929 essay, "Womanliness as a Masquerade." According to Charlotte Kroløkke and Anne Scott Sørensen, Rivière claims that

the border between what could be considered real as opposed to virtual womanliness is in fact nonexistent...She claimed this to be a long-established fact that was only exposed by the emergence of the 'new woman' at the beginning of the 20th century who aspired to economical and political independency and a career of her own—and was therefore considered to suffer from a masculinity

complex. Confronted with this, Rivière suggested that women should consciously use mimicry to suit their own ends. (129-130)

We see Rivière's suggestion being acted out in female jazz musicians' performances of race and gender (or imitations of "traditional" or "normal" ideals). These women used mimicry to obtain lucrative careers and independence. And, although political freedom for black musicians was impossible under Jim Crow, performances of race did allow for political subversion.

By exposing these strategic and conscious performances here, I do not mean to suggest that women were always in complete control of their own performances. In fact, during a tour of USO camps, "all-girl" bands were given strict instructions from the US government on how they must perform and what they must represent:

Women Camp Shows entertainers had to be perceived as 'good girls,' they had to be desirable, and they had to stimulate fantasies of a homeland that soldiers still cared about after fighting a war...Like pinups, they were supposed to be sexy. Unlike camp followers, they were supposed to be 'good girls.' *If either link in this complicated chain was disturbed, the USO didn't want them.* (Tucker 237, 246, my emphasis)

In other words, the government demanded women to represent the private sphere (by serving as symbols of sex and family and home) as they penetrated the public sphere. On the one hand, female jazz musicians' skilled performances of competing brands of femininities ("the sexy starlet and the girl next door") enabled these women to see parts of the world they would have never had the chance to see (260). In addition, it gave them an opportunity to fulfill their patriotic duties by comforting and uplifting the spirits of men that were fighting for them. On the other hand, the US government exploited "all-girl" bands and used them to "maintain an atmosphere of compulsory heterosexuality in a homosocial environment" (238). In a milieu where there was an increased chance of homoerotic relations, the government intervened by providing hyper-sexual yet wholesome women as a means to prevent possible "perversions."⁶ This is a perfect example of how hegemonic institutions enforce and maintain what Butler calls "the heterosexual matrix" (Butler 93). By promoting heterosexuality, the government is

⁶ This also included the prevention of racial "perversions." For example, black women's bands performing at USO Camps had to dress in military garb (Tucker 251). This could be considered an attempt to contain black sexuality in order to prevent interracial relationships. In other words, it was the government's way of maintaining Jim Crow abroad.

seemingly reinforcing gender/sex norms.⁷ But, regardless of who was in charge of directing the gender performances and for what reasons, it was still the performances themselves that enabled female jazz musicians to become mobile within and beyond US borders.

Interestingly, “all-girl” bands are not an isolated example of gender performance at work in a 1940s jazz context. The life of jazz pianist Billy Tipton (formerly Dorothy Lucille Tipton)⁸ demonstrates how drag (in the more traditional sense of the word) is used to achieve both social and personal mobility. Diane Wood Middlebrook’s biography of Billy, *Suits Me: The Double Life of Billy Tipton*, highlights how Billy’s permanent performance as a man allowed him to become a jazz musician. However, Middlebrook has been harshly criticized for claiming that a career in jazz was the primary motivation for Billy’s transformation. For instance, Judith Halberstam writes,

Middlebrook comes dangerously close to claiming that Tipton’s life as a man was simply the result of his overwhelming ambition to perform as a musician. Despite recent research providing evidence to the contrary (Dahl 2001; Tucker 2001), Middlebrook argues that jazz gigs were hard to come by for women in the 1930s and 1940s. And by emphasizing the impenetrable nature of this music scene for women, she is able to make Tipton’s desire to perform and tour seem like motivation enough for his momentous decision to live his life as man with a woman’s body. This rationalizing rubric then forces Middlebrook to view his relationships with women as elaborate deceptions within which, Tipton finds younger women to date and then exploits their sexual naivete, using them as a ‘beard.’ (57)

According to Halberstam, Middlebrook’s judgmental biography portrays Billy as a deceptive predator. She believes that Middlebrook wants to sway the reader to join her in feeling sorry for Billy’s wives (who claimed to know nothing about Billy’s secret identity). Halberstam continues, “When Middlebrook tries to reveal herself to the reader’s gaze, she oddly places herself in the

⁷ “Heterosexual matrix” refers to what society considers to be sex/gender norms. Anything outside of the “matrix” or “cultural grid of intelligibility” is deemed socially unacceptable (93). Butler writes, “for heterosexuality to remain intact as a distinct social form, it *requires* an intelligible conception of homosexuality, and also requires the prohibition of that conception in rendering it culturally intelligible” (93). As I have discussed, in Butler’s work drag “introduces a vital instability at the heart of heterosexual norms” and reveals “ontological inner depths and gender cores as regulatory fictions” (93). Ironically, then, the US government’s demand that women must perform a highly stylized (drag) version of femininity actually undermines the heterosexual matrix at the same time it reinforces it. Such performances only denaturalize femininity and reveal its construction

⁸ I will use the pronoun “he” to refer to Billy in this paper since that is the way he wished to be recognized. The quotes I use from Middlebrook use both “he” and “she” to refer to Billy depending on the context

position of a duped wife...she identifies and is in sympathy with Billy's wives rather than Billy" (59).

Although I think it is necessary to interrogate Middlebrook's stance as biographer here, I also think Halberstam ignores how different the worlds of male and female jazz musicians actually were. She cites Tucker's *Swing Shift* in the above quote, but by not acknowledging any of the hardship or humiliation members of "all-girl" bands experienced, Halberstam makes it seem as if there were an abundance of opportunities that would have been appealing to Billy as a woman. Considering Billy's strong masculine identification, putting on makeup and gowns and becoming a symbol of stereotypical femininity doesn't seem like something Billy would have been interested in at all. Moreover, as I stated earlier, male bands were taken much more seriously and had better reputations than female bands. This is apparent in Middlebrook's interview with Roberta Ellis, a former female jazz musician. Ellis states,

Male bands were superior. In retrospect, after traveling for three years with the girl band I later belonged to, I can say that the musicians were very good but were more or less held down, especially in jazz...Jazz was a man's world...I was a girl drummer. That's what we were pushing—female. But if I had been able to get into a male band, with musical expertise⁹ all around me, I probably would have become a better musician. (123)

Thus, performing a male persona enabled Billy to play with experienced musicians in a costume that he felt much more comfortable in compared to the outfits "all-girl" bands were forced to wear at the time. Although Halberstam raises some important questions about Middlebrook's perspective within the biography, I think that Middlebrook's choice to focus on Billy's jazz career is understandable and necessary. There were obviously more factors (psychological, sexual, etc.) that influenced Billy's decision to live as a man, but clearly his male persona allowed him to achieve a level of public success that would have otherwise been impossible. I would argue, then, that Billy's use of gender performance as a means to negotiate through the male sphere of jazz is in large part what makes his life so unique and therefore attractive to biographers.

At the beginning of Billy's career as a jazz musician, his band members (in addition to his family members) knew he was biologically female. As one musician remembers, "it was

⁹ I think "expertise" here is not necessarily referring to male musicians' superiority, but rather to male musicians' years of experience and training that wasn't available to most women.

common knowledge, you know...that she was female...normal person who dressed like a man, but we knew she was a woman—but very nice...she dressed as a man and she played good piano. Really, no one thought anything about it” (Middlebrook 92). This passage indicates that Billy had an audience who was aware of his performance from the start. And as he got older, that audience became increasingly selective (in his old age the only people who knew his secret were his cousins, Madeline and Eilene). However, the fact that he wanted an audience at all (he could have simply cut all ties to his past) suggests that he was proud of his gender performance and the success and mobility that resulted from it. This pride is only solidified by the way his secret was revealed to the public at large. Middlebrook writes:

The dramatic way she surrendered her secret at the time of her death suggests that she wanted the disguise to become part of the record too...When he died, Billy was wearing no bindings or genital gear, nor was there any sign that Billy was anticipating discovery. But she did not ask Madeline and Eilene [her cousins] to rescue her and keep the secret intact. Until death arrived, Billy swung as easily as ever in the hammock s/he had strung between these pillars of identity, those pronouns that sort the world into opposites and complements.” (9, 281)

It isn't surprising to me that Billy eventually wanted credit for his performance. After all, it was an incredibly rewarding performance that helped him live the life he desired. I do not mean to say that Billy should be lauded for disguising his identity. Rather, I think his use of performance as a highly skilled and strategic means to achieve happiness and personal/social mobility deserves to be acknowledged as just that: an impressive and beneficial performance. As Middlebrook notes, “being Billy full-time solved the psychological and social difficulties presented by Dorothy's strong masculine gender identification and her sexual desire for women, quite aside from solving the problem of achieving professional status in a man's world” (138). Thus, despite Middlebrook's intentional or unintentional biases, she clearly portrays Billy as a savvy and talented performer. Furthermore, like Tucker's, Middlebrook's illumination of gender performance in a jazz context has helped pave the way for others to begin to question and analyze gender's salient role in a seemingly ungendered jazz discourse.

Read in dialogue, *Swing Shift* and *Suits Me* illustrate the polar ends of a gender performance spectrum. They provide us with two very diverse gender strategies that allowed jazz musicians to navigate through largely uncharted spheres as women in a dominantly masculine terrain. And, in a more general sense, these texts shed light on some significant connections

between jazz and gender. For instance, both gender and jazz performances involve self-invention, creativity, imitation, and improvisation; these types of performances are strategic and context specific. Just as the women I have discussed above tailored their gender performances according to particular situations, jazz musicians often altered their styles according to the social and political climate in which they were operating. From Swing to Be-Bop to Fusion, the spectrum of jazz is as wide and complicated as the spectrum of gender. After considering these similarities, it is no surprise that some of the most successful gender performers were jazz musicians. Whether one is male or female, it seems that having the ability to “swing” gender effectively is the key to becoming mobile in a jazz landscape.

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