The jazz scene is a haven for women. The wit, the swing, the sparkling intellect, the biting rhetoric, are present in any modern jazz bar on any modern jazz night. Women are making their mark and making it with a vengeance. In New York City, the scene is especially vibrant, with clubs like the 5 Spot and the Birdland attracting a diverse audience of women.
Terri: "I get fed up with that kind of tension quite frankly. I find neither amusing nor challenging. I prefer to use my energy for the music instead of this competing."

Terri has a story to illustrate this last point about missed energy. Recently at a gig she found the (male) pianist throwing her music back at her, accusing her of having written the chords wrongly. It had the desired effect at the time; she felt embarrassed and angry in public. However, in the break she told him that she didn't care for his attitude and that the music was correct. To try and prove his case, he grabbed the sheets and played through them — only to find that the chords were more sophisticated than those he was accustomed to. "This," concluded Terri, "is the kind of situation that is geared to keeping a woman in her place."

This kind of confrontation could quite simply be the dissonant grating of two opposite characters, irrespective of sex. But to write it off altogether as an (assumed) personality clash is to ignore the unhappy fact that from time to time efforts are made to discredit women musicians just because they are women. This is undoubtedly one reason for the scarcity of women musicians. Countless women, perhaps not yet fully confident in their abilities, may have been so discouraged by similar downgrading encounters that they withdrew altogether from jazz. The impetus behind all-women teaching groups thus becomes only too clear.

Viewing the present climate at its bleakest, what qualities does it take to stay the course? Gill: "You've got to be strong in the beginning."

Terri: "You've got to believe in yourself, not justify yourself."

Maggie: "With me, it's a bit of both. I did have a huge inferiority complex when I started. The important thing is not to turn round to other women who want to come forward and say, well, I had to... not to feel precious about your position now."

"That's another thing, divide and fall. You can sometimes get a bit jealous about feeling the potential in other women coming out, and you've really got to fight that one."

"I used to have this idea that male instrumentalists were born hearing chord sequences and were ready-made improvisors. I never realised that all musicians came across the same difficulties when they started. I really thought there was something different in their ears! I used to wonder at Ronnie's, when they'd go off in the middle and walk to the bar — how do they know when to come back?"

"You're supposed to sit there and look decorative. What is the reality of dress for a gig?"

Terri: "I seldom wear dresses in my everyday life, so I see no sense in putting one on to play music. I just wear clothes which make me feel good and relaxed."

Barbara: "On the other hand, we are females, so I intend to look like a woman don't want babysitting, they just want you around as moral support."

Barbara: "It depends so much on your partner. If Jon hadn't encouraged me to continue playing, I wouldn't have stuck it."

Gill: "But if you don't have a partner?"

Maggie: "You lose and you gain, but I find I'm stronger without a bloke. My ex-husband was a musician. His priorities would always appear as the priorities. He was going out and doing his thing, and whoever was looking after the child? It would always be me."

Barbara: "I tell myself, the kids aren't stopping me from doing anything I want to do. If I don't do it in spite of them, then perhaps I wouldn't do it any more."

"Another thing. Having kids gives you discipline, because if you know they're out of the house for a couple of hours, you don't know you've got to get some work done because those are the only two or three hours you've got. Before we had kids we used to stay in bed till noon and get hardly anything done. So really, in a way, you can use the circumstances to further your own ends."

Norma: "It's true; it does galvanise you into sorting yourself out. I think we wanted a hell of a lot of time before we had children — whereas now I think that a lot of the time when I could be doing something musical, I use looking after the children!"

Terri: "I do find that because I'm on my own, it can be difficult to be always self-motivated."

Maggie: "The first months of parenthood you're retreating into this thing of wanting to be a housewife. Then you say, I want to do gigs again, and then you sort out the practicalities, like babysitting."

Gill: "I've never understood women who haven't had the drive to work at something, I don't necessarily mean for money, just something other than the house."

When it comes to fees, women jazz musicians face much the same problems as men. Certain promoters and publicists continue to capitalise on the alleged non-commerciality of jazz ("a fiver for the band... and the chance to play in public!") and Gill's experience could equally apply to a newcomer of either sex, and to many areas besides music:

"Early on, I began to realise that I was absolutely being used and being paid less than the blokes in the band — not all bands, mind you, but some. I put my foot down then, and if anyone rang up I asked what the money was. Then I got a reputation for being terribly hard about money and that I wouldn't go out for less than £25 which was a load of rubbish. All I wanted to know was what the money was, and if I thought it was worth my time, then I'd do the job."

Beyond this kind of occurrence, the women in the group hadn't experienced any discrimination over fees. Where there's an artistic acceptance, there seems to be financial honesty.

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Barbara: “Sometimes you do things for less money than usual, if it’s a job that you want to do. But then it’s your decision.”

Much of what’s been said concerns precedents and preconceptions about the position of women in jazz. Opinions about the state of the art at the present time vary somewhat and are coloured by the attitudes and personal experiences of the artists themselves. All, however, seemed to view the future with optimism. One indicator of better things to come is that, in the view of most of the group, the male-female balance in the typical audience is evening up.

Norma: “I would say there are more women coming to gigs now than when I first started, though that was more of a male province because I was usually working in pubs. But women are certainly becoming more interested in music.”

Terri: “Even when I was with John [Stevens] there were always a lot of women in the audience. Today women form a large part of my audience and this does extend to musical interest and support. So recently there was the demand for a women’s festival where MoonSpirit and Ova played to 200 women.”

Equally, there was a fairly substantial feeling that the running of workshops could provide a partial solution of the problem of discrimination. Through a mixture of guidance, practice and experiment, interested women could, it was felt, gain the necessary confidence and skill to be able to work really constructively and creatively in jazz. In fact, the launching of a number of workshops has highlighted the surprisingly large numbers of people who, for whatever reason, would like a practical involvement with music.

Norma: “I know that more and more women are ringing me up, asking if I’d give lessons. They want to become involved. It’s difficult for them, not because of male opposition in particular, but because there’s really nowhere for them to go and try things out. Workshops can be of really therapeutic value, getting people to express themselves vocally, which I think could be good for almost everybody.”

Maggie: “I’m coming across so many women who’ve been waiting to use their voices and there are some incredible things coming out. You suddenly realise, they’ve always wanted to do it, it’s just a question of how. They’ve always felt inhibited.”

Terri: “When I started my drum workshop in October 1976, I had the shock of my life when they turned up. I’m teaching about 20 women every week, I don’t know where they’re coming from. But they need this opening. Once you’ve mastered that, then you’re away.”

Norma: “At the present time, I can’t see anything holding a woman back.”

The talent of male chauvinist pigery still disfigures the face of jazz, but there are, it seems, encouraging signs of a move towards emancipation for women jazz artists. Along with the need to break down the barriers of male prejudice there is a requirement for women players to acquire confidence — confidence to play on equal footing with male counterparts and, if necessary, positively to celebrate the differences of a female approach to music. It would be salutary if the male musicians who have not done so to date would accept women’s involvement in jazz rationally and unequivocally. Confidence from promoters, landlords and the ad men booking session musicians to the point where they cease blocking off women with gratuitous complaints about disorganisation, wildliness and other real or (mainly) imagined sins, would be a major step in the right direction. It ain’t just what you do, it’s also sometimes the way you do it.

The blues, as they say, don’t care whose got ’em. And jazz don’t care who plays it, even if too many male jazz musicians still...