



Some Like It Hot: Jazz Women in Film and Television, 1928–1959

Kirstin McGee

Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2009

ISBN: 978-0-8195-6908-0 (PB)

RRP: \$27.95 (PB)

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Thinking about female instrumentalists in Hollywood films, I am immediately reminded of Jack Lemmon and Tony Curtis in drag in *Some Like It Hot* (1959), yet thinking about female jazz instrumentalists in general, I blank out. Kristin A. McGee's book is a welcome education for the reader both in the vicissitudes of audiovisual media music, and gender in music. Indeed, the "underrepresentation of female instrumentalists and jazz performers in the ... jazz canon" constitutes a pivotal point of departure for McGee, and her explicit aim is to "examine women's roles as objects of reproduction technologies, as well as the complex motivations for cataloguing and defining musical genres" (2009, pp. 3–4). At issue for her are also the ways in which the jazz canon, gender and race are implicated in the construction of American cultural values.

Some Liked It Hot is divided into four parts, the first of which deals with the 1920s 'Jazz Age' and focuses on the feminisation of mass culture through the emergence of 'all-girl bands' and their racial dynamics. In this section there is very little on cinematic media, but the discussion on broader questions about the construction of "feminine novelty" in the "highly proscriptive and segregated context of the 1930s-era culture industries" (2009, pp. 21, 34) provides the reader with crucial background for the subsequent analyses of individual films. The second part of the book concentrates on the 'Swing Era' sound films and the role of two all-girl bands in them: Phil Spitalny's *Hour of Charm* and Ina Ray Hutton's *Melodears*. In the third part, at issue are the developments during the 1940s in terms of "Hollywood's musical-racial matrix" (Chapter Five), wartime sexuality as mass-mediated in swing-inflicted sound films and the "cult of white womanhood" in swing-centred Hollywood films (Chapter Seven). The section concludes with a chapter on independent black sound film production, with an emphasis on the input of the International Sweethearts of Rhythm, an 'all-coloured', all-girl jazz band, in the film *That Man of Mine* (1946). The fourth part of *Some Liked It Hot* centres on 1950s variety television by highlighting the role of female jazz musicians in the 'new' medium, the revival of all-girl bands and the way in which television enhanced the careers of select female jazz and popular music musicians.

Methodologically, McGee adheres explicitly to a deconstructive comparative approach that "draw[s] heavily from the disciplines of ethnomusicology, gender studies, and cultural studies" that also crucially hinges upon on a revisionist historiographical

stance in that she “attempts to provide an alternative and broader examination of women’s presence in jazz and in American popular music during the first half of the twentieth century” (2009, pp. 5, 6). It becomes clear that the ethnomusicological influence pertains to a conception of music-as-culture conception, which aligns well with questions of socio-cultural power relations, but may cause the reader to expect a more fieldwork-based account. This is further confused by a passing remark on a combination of ethnography and historiography, as in the end the former becomes a misnomer for artists’ biographies, which are nonetheless placed in context.

McGee further emphasises the need to engage in a comparative musicological analysis by paying attention to formal identifiers such as repertoires, styles and “individual soloing vocabularies of the all-girl bands” (2009, p. 8), as opposed to the male big bands of the day. Despite the stress on formal musical features, the ‘musicological’ analytical passages remain in the end largely impressionistic due to the abundant use of adjectives. This may of course be a matter of general accessibility, but problems arise when one has to assess the plausibility of an argument about a broader stylistic change, for example, on the basis of “saccharine”, “clean and powerful”, “boisterous” and “lush” musical features (2009, pp. 104–105). Furthermore, one cannot but wonder what is expected from the reader when referring to “a kind of Basie meets Mancini orchestration” (2009, p. 234). McGee remains commendably attentive to musical sound throughout the book, yet a more careful dissection of the aural differences and similarities would have been useful.

Given the broader cultural studies template, it is surprising that there are virtually no explicit references to popular music studies, or that ‘popular (music/culture)’ is not included in the index. Likewise, the methodologies of media studies remain unacknowledged, which is particularly astonishing, given the focus on “representations of jazz women in mass-mediated texts” (2009, p. 6), not to mention the abundance of literature on soundtracks and film musicals. Regarding gender, in turn, the analysis rests predominantly on a conventional female/male dichotomy, which to some extent is understandable given the explicit focus on female musicians, but in the end risks essentialising the markers and significance of gender in music into a set typology of female characters. It is undeniable, though, that *Some Liked It Hot* includes several intriguing and illustrative examples that highlight the historical, social and cultural interconnections between cinema, race, gender and jazz; yet there is a considerable amount of methodological apraxia and opacity.

The ambiguity of the denominator ‘jazz’ remains rather thinly theorised. This results first of all in interpretations that border on anachronisms; rather than accusing the cabarets of transmitting “a one-sided picture of jazz culture” (2009, p. 25), it might be more constructive to elaborate further on the social power relations that underlie jazz in its various ‘true’ manifestations. The same goes for the implicit accolade of “innovative jazz styles such as cool jazz and bebop” (2009, p. 203). In addition to the risk of valorising past idioms according to present day criteria, there is a general ambivalence and conflation over what exactly is meant by such labels as ‘jazz’, ‘mass’ and ‘popular’, and how these interrelate. This has also direct methodological consequences, as the use of vague and taken for granted generic labels leaves quite a lot for the reader to infer, for example regarding the more detailed distinctions between “jazz, blues, and jazz-inflected popular song” (2009, p. 226).

The book is written in an accessible and clear style, with few errors, excepting a reference to Chuck Berry’s “1950s anthem Move Over Beethoven” (2009, p. 133). The overall composition is a tad unbalanced and tautological, as the length of individual chapter varies from ten to thirty-five pages, and certain performers are reintroduced when moving on from one medium to another. This is nevertheless a minor nuisance, and may be attributable to the replenishing of the author’s PhD thesis with pre-published material. More bothersome though is the obvious assumption of a US-based readership that becomes evident, for instance, in references to the local minutiae of Chicago, to the social significance of certain songs, and to the 1940s wartime “Double

V movement” in particular (2009, pp. 139–141) and its civil rights significance for African Americans in aiming at victory on fronts abroad and in the United States.

The virtues of *Some Liked It Hot* reside in the extensive historical outline it offers about a particular type of jazz musician whose “cultural significance is consistently devalued” (2009, p. 4), and in challenging the canonised truths and values of both jazz historiography and scholarship. The historical narrative is compelling, although an academic audience may disparage the dominant descriptiveness and interpretive ambiguity this yields. Nonetheless, my main concern after reading *Some Liked It Hot* is how to find even a couple of the films mentioned between its covers for my own amusement, astonishment and education.