

Nine Women In The Room: A Jazz Musicians' Roundtable  
Conducted by freelance reporter Lara Pellegrinelli

Participants:

Terri Lyne Carrington, drummer

Geri Allen, pianist

Helen Sung, pianist

Esperanza Spalding, bassist

Ingrid Jensen, trumpeter

Tineke Postma, saxophonist

Nona Hendryx, vocalist

Gretchen Parlato, vocalist

LP: Did you think about it specifically as a women's project? 'Cause here we all are, and it seems like a little bit more than coincidence.

TC: But of course. [laughter] No, honestly, forever – since I was 10 years old – people have tried to put me in all-female situations, and it's the first question I get asked in an interview. It's always about being a female playing the drums. I've always shied away from all-female situations because I felt that the pool wasn't large enough to choose from, and that I wasn't going to do it just because. Now the pool is larger and there are so many women I really enjoy playing with. It doesn't matter that they're women and I thought, now's the time to do what people have been asking for. I felt like it was a good time to celebrate all of the women artists—and this, of course, is not representative of all the women jazz artists, but it is a nice slice.

LP: I'm wondering if someone else might speak to that. Maybe Ingrid has things to say about all-female projects. One way besides genre to label people or put them in a box is to say that, okay, you belong to this gender and therefore you're going to play like this or you should play in these projects.

IJ: Well, first of all, I have to say that when Terri emailed me I was glad that I was free to do this. Which is very rare. If anyone knows me, they know that I avoid all women groups like the plague because I've had enough experiences where the weakest links overpower the integrity of the music. I just like to play with people who are open-minded and want to play good music. So in this situation, when I saw all of the names of the people involved and Terri said in the email that she really wanted me to be a part of it, I knew right away that it was going to be something very, very important and special.

LP: NPR is doing a series on women in music and asking some of the same questions that I'm sure you and other musicians have been asked. If it's really true that what you said, Terri Lyne – that you feel that the field is finally open to a point where you can do this project in a way that wouldn't have been possible say 10 years earlier – then maybe there are things we can be doing in the media to cover you in a different way. Esperanza?

ES: I'm actually trying to imagine what would I ask a woman musician about her art and about her experience without focusing on her gender. Because I'm a woman and because I do this, I wouldn't actually think to focus on that specifically. So maybe part of it is experiential. I don't know if it means working harder in all fields to bring more women into all realms of artistic expression, be it journalism or performance, dance, whatever it may be. But I know that the more you're exposed to something and the more you interact with people who do a certain thing or come from a certain realm, the less foreign it seems. Today, it's not an oddity to see women doing almost anything. So all I would offer in terms of the question – which is "What can the media do?" – is maybe be more inclusive and accept the real landscape that's here. It's not like, "Wow, it's so special that you play that. What's that like?" [If you said,] "Wow, you're a woman and you play classical music. What's that like?" People would go, "Huh?" Who cares about that angle anymore. And maybe we'll automatically need to go to a deeper level in terms of investigating this person's art.

LP: When I see you all together, it looks pretty normal to me. You're hanging out and there's a spirit of camaraderie, but when you're in there, certainly, your sleeves are rolled up and you're working hard. There isn't anything different about that. Although there was some conversation about makeup for the cameras. [laughter]

TC: Something I want to add is that I find it interesting that after all of this time I have been playing, people still are surprised. I am actually shocked when people are surprised that I play drums—or more surprised when they think I play pretty good. That's really what shocks me. They really think immediately—

TP: That you sound like a man.

TC: Right.

TP: That's a compliment most of the time.

LP: Do you get that a lot, Tineke?

TP: Yeah, you hear that. But what I would like to add – also, to what Esperanza was saying – is that as long as the media keeps on emphasizing the female thing, you keep on putting a stamp on it. If we just emphasize the person, then maybe it will get less special, being a female artist. Then you're just an artist. When I'm playing with Terri Lyne or Geri – we toured as a quartet a couple of times – I was not aware of the fact that I was playing with female musicians. It was people telling me constantly that it's special. And I was like, "Oh yeah, that's true."

LP: Ten years ago when I started writing, I found occasions to hang out with Al Grey and Ray Brown and James Moody. Most of the time, I was the only young woman around. Maybe that dynamic has changed a little bit now, but there was only one other female writer in the jazz genre who was my age. So I found that looking to the musicians really helped me a lot. I did interviews with Abbey Lincoln and Shirley Horn, who were great

to me. I knew Ingrid back then and Jane Ira Bloom. Those were the people who I looked up to because there weren't even necessarily role models for me in the media. There really were no female editors at any of the jazz magazines. I think that's part of the reason why those same images keep being re-circulated.

TC: Maybe women don't like jazz. [laughter]

IJ: They're smart enough to know better.

TC: They know where the real money is.

ES: Recently, I got to do this special event with [pianist] McCoy Tyner. And someone asked him – I was present – what do you think about women in this music? He said, "Oh, you know" – he was talking about me – "she's good, but I've never seen women that stick with it." What I was thinking is that probably before music became so visual and so much about the image that is being marketed, people could develop their craft for many decades. So, if you put out a record or a song, you could be in your thirties or your forties and have something polished and ready to deliver at a very advanced level. I'm imagining in different decades, the pressures on women to be the housewife and stay at home with the kids didn't really allow people's careers to continue on into the more mature areas of their artistry. Perhaps one reason we're starting to see more and more women is a combination of the fact that people get the limelight a lot earlier a) before they have settled down and had families, and b) there's a lot more pressure on how people look. Maybe people are seeking out more women for music and, because we see more women, it's more inspiration for other women and the pressures have changed.

IJ: Slowly.

LP: Well, in symphony orchestras, it's about even at this point. Which is kind of interesting. But with orchestras you've had organizations that have made it their mission to see that there isn't discrimination. There are formal auditions where people perform behind a screen, so at least theoretically no one knows who's there to audition for that part. Given the way that jazz has come down over the years, that isn't part of the tradition. So I wonder for you all, is hiring, in being a side person, something that could lead to some kind of discrimination? Even if it's not something that people are consciously doing. Helen?

HS: I don't limit this to guys. People like to work with people they know and feel comfortable around. Chances are that a guy is going to feel more comfortable with his buddy. Somebody said to me once, "Helen, if you want that chair, you're going to have to be twice as good as your male counterpoint." Maybe it's true. The important thing is that over time there are more role models. There are precedents being set. The bar is higher and higher. I don't think any of us here are afraid of doing the work. We love this music. We're passionate about our craft and we want to get our voices out there. That's all we can do. The trick is knowing what you can control and what things you just have to trust and have faith that if you stick to it, in the end you will be heard.

LP: Have any of you ever felt like you've had a hard time fitting into jazz for any reason? Because there have been times in my life when I've questioned my place just based on who I am. Do I fit culturally with this? Does this make sense in my life? Gretchen?

GP: It was really never a question. I think it definitely helped growing up in an artistic family where there were jazz musicians and all kinds of artists. There was never any question that it wasn't a normal career or that it wouldn't be as fulfilling or financially stable. Whatever your passion is, just do it. And it just happened to be music. As a singer, my experience is very different than instrumentalists. Because for singers, we've had female role models forever. So, I don't have the same experiences. For me, it's more the singer's role. What can you do outside of that box? But no one ever asks me about the fact that I'm a woman. [laughter]

LP: Do you think that image has played more of a role in your careers than it has in your male counterparts—whether you think about publicity or photos or videos, the trappings that go with your careers?

IJ: You should ask them. I'm serious. A lot of men have said, yes, the reason Ingrid gets that attention is because people remember her. It's not that she's that great of a player. So when I hear things like that I have to go to all right, self-therapy, self-help. *Oh, I believe in me!* But seriously, you know that's going on around you.

TC: You're absolutely right.

IJ: And there are other elephants around you, too, but that's one issue where we have to support each other and build each other up even more.

LP: But do you see that in a practical sense, when you're at a photo shoot with Joe Lovano. Does it matter if he's wearing a red-sequined strapless gown?

HS: Oh, Lord! [laughter]

TC: That's a funny question.

ES: Yes, it is. I'm realizing with that question how blessed I've been by the people I play with. Because with people like Joe that has nothing to do with his motivation for having me participate in the work. And he would never ever – ever, ever, ever – say anything about my image, or how it related to what people were interpreting from my female presence. He wouldn't, but other people certainly do. That is the experience I've always had with the musicians. *With the musicians*. Now that doesn't have to do with other higher powers [in the music industry].

TC: I think you just have to do what you do. You can't pay attention to that or you'll go nuts. When I came up there were absolutely no female drummers. There just weren't. I

was young enough where I wasn't paying attention to that. I didn't know that it was an oddity. I saw men as my role models.

LP Jack DeJohnette?

TC: Yes, Jack was a big model for me. My dad, he knew all the musicians. I grew up in jazz. My grandfather played jazz. My dad played jazz. So I always remember jazz musicians being around the house or he would always take me to hear them play. And those were my role models. I didn't think it was odd there weren't any women because I wasn't identifying myself as a woman. I was just a kid.

HS: Can I add being Asian American, too? That's a good point that Terri made because my parents wanted me to be a doctor. They were already unhappy when I came home and said I wanted to be a classical musician, and then I came home one day and said you know what? I think I want to try jazz. So I totally agree with Terri. I looked to people like Clark Terry, Wayne Shorter, Herbie Hancock. Those were my role models. I guess I identified myself as a musician.

TC: I'm interested in you and Geri talking about being female pianists because that came next after female singers. There were always female pianists. So maybe you guys didn't get it as hard as Ingrid and myself.

GA: I remember when I was in high school in Detroit – I went to Cass Tech – and at the time [pianist] Terry Pollard was playing with [vibraphonist] Terry Gibbs and I got to see her at the Masonic Temple. That was a breakthrough moment for me because certainly I was playing jazz and had been embraced by the musicians on the scene, [trumpeter] Marcus Belgrave and musicians like that. But then seeing her and how fierce she was—she commanded the bandstand in a way that I will never forget. So I saw a place for myself at that moment. Certainly, I have all of the same role models that you mentioned Helen and a lot of others as well. But I think that someone like a [composer and pianist] Mary Lou Williams. [This is her centennial](#). Just the idea of these people being out there—really out there on their own and, by themselves, blazing the trail. All of those things have contributed to where we are today with all of the brilliant young players having a more open perspective from the audience, from the powers that be.

TC: Yeah, we were talking about that earlier, Geri and I: the road being paved in some regard. Every generation has benefited from previous generations. So I'm happy that Esperanza doesn't have to deal with quite as much baloney as I did.

TP: Maybe I can add something to that because I am from the Netherlands and I studied here in 2002 at the Manhattan School of Music. I was so inspired by the scene here in New York because there were many more female players here than in Europe. I think it's still very hard to find great female musicians in Europe. You have a couple of them. But here in New York, it's much further developed. So New York can be a very good example for how it should be because in Europe, we're still not there yet.

LP: You all talked about role models, but it seems that mentors are also very important. And, of course, there are certain people like Clark Terry who are known for extending a hand to women musicians. I was wondering if anyone has something to say about an experience with a mentor who's also cleared the way. Terri Lyne?

TC: For the record, I want to say that Clark Terry was also a big mentor for me. I know that Helen mentioned him as well, but that was my first gig.

IJ: That's right. How old were you?

TC: 18. My first trip to Europe was with Clark. And I love him dearly. And then when I started playing with Wayne Shorter. He is somebody who really is a champion for women. I know Wayne has touched all of us pretty directly when I look around. Women and children were in the forefront in his science fiction books [Ed. note Shorter is an avid reader of science fiction], so he really believes we're the future. Whenever he's had to the opportunity to encourage a female musician, he did. My career changed when I started playing with him, as well as my mind and everything else. Same with Herbie Hancock. Both were extremely important to my development as a musician and a person. And that's what makes a mentor.

IJ: As much as it seems like it's such a rarity for women to be doing this, there have always been women—in classical music and in jazz. There were two female trumpet role models who I had early on and sort of took for granted. One was Stacy Rowles. I got a recording of her from Diana Krall of all people. And I listened to her sing and play and went, "Wow." That was a big game changer for me and my parents weren't too happy about it. I said, "See! She plays and she makes a living at it. I can do it, too." And they were not too convinced. The other is a teacher named Laurie Frink, who is basically *the* teacher to all trumpet players, to all brass players in need on many levels. Without those two solid characters, I don't know if I would have really gone for it the way I was able to technically and in my mind—just being able to see myself do that. There have always been women. That's my point. It's not like all of a sudden this is a new development.

GA: Betty Carter—she was a significant person in my career and, just watching her on the bandstand, she was able to touch the last person in the back of the room. The smiles that would be on people's faces. That's a tradition of the music that we're talking about—the mentoring is such a core part of it. Terri has taken that on. [others voice agreement] All of these people here. You're the one who has brought it together.

TC: Oh, come on now.

GA: And she's the one who has continued in this tradition.

TC: Maybe at Berklee, not here. They [indicating her fellow musicians] mentor me. But it is important to pass it on. Whatever you have to offer. I try to do that at Berklee. That's one of the reasons why I'm teaching. It's hard because it takes a lot of energy to do that. It really made me appreciate the people who did that for me. 'Cause now I really

understand the time they took out of their lives to have me come to their house and take me to this concert or here and there.

LP: That there are also structured organizations, competitions, and festivals out there as opposed to maybe the more informal networks of musicians. Maybe that's one of the things that is helping women?

TC: I would just like to make a suggestion that we shift to talking about music and not about women. I know that's part of your thing, but none of us think about being a woman. We already said that, but I'll reiterate—none of us think about being a woman when we play or write songs or do all the other work that has to be done to organize even just a project like this. Nobody thinks about that part of it. If that makes other people attracted to it, that's fine with me, but I think in the end we're doing what we have to do. We have to do this. It's an unwritten thing.

GA: Part of it is sharing it. The way that it came to you was through having hands-on with these great master musicians. And now you're at a university and you're the master musician imparting your wisdom to these young musicians. And I think that's what mentorship has evolved to in this music. Ingrid and I are both teaching at the University of Michigan. When I'm teaching my students, I think of it in the way I learned. That's the way I see teaching—to give in the same way. I guess it's a little bit more tempered, as opposed to being pushed off the bandstand for playing the wrong note. But the idea is still there.

TC: Tough love.

LP: Well, we live in a slightly kinder, gentler world now in general. Geri, when we last talked, you were telling me about having salons with your students.

GA: Mary Lou Williams would have these wonderful salons at her home. And people like Bud Powell, Thelonious Monk, Art Tatum, Dr. Billy Taylor, Hank Jones—all the great pianists at the time would frequent her salons. It was an incubator for this new modern music that was breaking through. So it's an interesting question—the effect and the impact that all of those great piano players being together, at the same time at the same place had. That burst through in the music.

TC: I'd like to add a story that Dr. [Billy] Taylor told us recently. He said he went to Mary Lou Williams's house once. And she had Thelonious Monk and Bud Powell there and she said, "I want you to teach them how to touch the piano." And I thought that was remarkable—that Mary Lou Williams was in essence a mentor to Bud Powell and Thelonious Monk. But the thing I came away with – and I asked him directly – was that they took that from her. Because she was like a mother. She was probably the only person that could tell them, "Listen, you don't really know how to touch the piano yet." Who else would they take that from? A woman who was strong enough to say, "Come here, let me show you how to do this." He said their sound changed. If you hear the recordings after that their sound really did change and improve.

LP: I programmed a jazz festival last year, and I didn't call it a "women in jazz" festival, but I booked women. It was my way of thinking about audience. Because if there's a person out there who might be interested in jazz, but doesn't feel like there are people up there on that bandstand like them, does that convey a certain message? Is that important to someone who might be listening to the music?

NH: One of the first shows we [The Bluebells] did was with Dinah Washington and Brook Benton and people like that. My school was onstage: playing theaters, doing three, four, five shows a day. You learn from the masters that way. And they took no prisoners. You were onstage; you were meant to perform. If you did and the audience loved you, you came back again and you were paid a bit more. In terms of an audience, they're there to be a part of it as well. I'm not just there to bring them something; they're there to bring me something. And if they don't want to participate, they don't. They can leave. Everybody is free to go.

LP: I've been wondering about your experience as a songwriter. Was it very different for you to go from a place where you were singing songs by other people that were given to the group, and then turn around and create all these amazing things for yourselves?

NH: At the time that I was a part of the group, The Blue Bells and then Labelle, there were women who were writing songs: Carole King and a lot of women from the Brill Building. But as a girl group, you wore nice outfits and nice wigs and you sang. We were lucky in that we made the transition with the British Invasion with artists like the Beatles and the Rolling Stones who wrote their own music. We were managed by someone [Vicki Wickham] who thought that women should have that as well. And that's how it happened. She said, "Can anybody in this group write a song?" And I said, "Well, I can write words." And we were encouraged. We were treated like a band, not like a girl group, and took off our gowns, took off our wigs, grew afros, put on our tie-dyed jeans and jumped up on stage instead of waving around going, "Oooh—Ahhh—" And it was another woman influencing and supporting and mentoring women.

LP: And making it possible on the business side.

NH: At that time, in the mid-sixties, there were more women involved in journalism for rock. There weren't many women running record companies. There was Florence Greenberg who had a label with the Shirelles and people like that on it. There were a couple of female engineers. This is ancient history, so I'm sorry, but there were women getting involved. And really there were so many women behind a lot of the male groups and male solo artists becoming successful and that helped over time, by having women come from behind the business scene to support other women who are artists.

LP: That was true in jazz, too, with people like Gladys Hampton behind the scenes with the Lionel Hampton band or Ora Harris, who was managing Benny Carter and now Geri.

TC: That's how it should be. I think that women should be involved in all aspects of the music business and not just performance. One thing that bugs me is when women – whether it's the artist or especially behind the scenes – take on the personas and the nature of their male counterparts. I think people felt like they had to be tough. I even have to fight that myself. Sometimes I do have to be tough, but you feel forced to because you want your voice heard. At some point you realize that you can have your voice heard without being so rough about it. I'm hoping and seeing more now that it isn't like that as much. We're evolving.

IJ: I wanted to add that I think the men are evolving, too, and that makes it easier. I see a younger generation of men who don't see white, black, purple, green, girl, boy. They just say, "Man, I love your lines. Can you play on my record?" And I'm like, "Ah, finally!" That took awhile, but it's really happening. It gives the art a chance now just to be what it is, rather than a girl's club, boy's club, or any of those silly things.

LP: If fifty-plus percent of the people on the planet are female, and they're a disproportionately small part of the audience, then perhaps the audience could grow if women were better represented in the music. A funny story—well, maybe not so funny. One of the male jazz bloggers wrote a very earnest post about a year ago asking why the female jazz audience is so small. "I go to these clubs," he said, "I go to festivals, and there aren't very many women there. What can we do to help bring more women to jazz?" And his conclusion? If men told them what was good to listen to, then maybe more women would be interested in jazz.

IJ: Okay, so there are still men that need to evolve and change. We'll pray for him.

LP: For me, until I started seeing women – and from some of the things you've said about identifying other women in the music – I wonder about a sense of feeling like you don't belong.

TC: As far as audience is concerned, most of the people I know that listen to music don't care if they listen to men or women. So I don't know. Maybe women don't like jazz. I know that's a funny statement, but all I mean is if the proportion's really as small as you're saying – I don't know who's counting, I don't know the numbers – I'm just saying, when I go to listen to music, when I go to turn on the radio, I could care less if the song is being sung by a man or a woman and much less who's playing.