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UNDERWHELMED

Note Imperfect

By Sandy Asirvatham | Posted 10/4/2000

"Sorry!" "Oops, sorry about that!" "That was supposed to be a major seventh. I'm really sorry!"

In my recent efforts as a student jazz pianist, I've rekindled a terrible tendency I thought I'd outgrown: gratuitous apologizing. In September, I started my second year in the Howard Community College jazz ensemble. I know the other students and the teacher pretty well, and I know I've made solid progress since last fall, when my chart-reading skills were nil. I often lost my place on a simple B-flat blues progression, and I had no idea how to maintain a left-hand chord progression while improvising a right-hand solo. Yet despite my growing comfort level, I still find myself muttering useless apologies when I've missed a repeat sign or played a hinky chord voicing. I let loose these unnecessary verbal responses to dumb little errors that are a) no worse than anyone else's dumb little errors, b) not actually harming anyone, and c) completely to be expected--not just by students sight-reading new material, but by musicians at all levels when they work in an informal, improvisational way. OK, maybe not Oscar Peterson, but pretty much everyone else.

The apologizing is simply the flip side of my tendency toward perfectionism--the exact personality trait I've been trying to neutralize by venturing into jazz as a nonprodigy neophyte. To some extent, perfectionism is a result of the high-expectation regime in which I grew up. (A mild but typical for-instance: If I came home with a 97 on a grade-school test, my father was apt to say, with only a hint of forced levity in his voice, "Well, where are the other three points?")

I have a lot of friends who grew up in similar households, where if you weren't going to be The Best at something (whatever the hell that means), you shouldn't even try, a pernicious, joy-killing philosophy of parenthood that will surely keep the makers of Prozac in business for many generations to come. These friends include both men and women. But I suspect that my perfectionism is, in part, a function of having been born and raised female.

All that stuff girls are supposed to start worrying about in adolescence (shaved legs, plucked eyebrows, color-coordinated outfits)--what is all that about if not the tacit requirement to present yourself as "finished," a completed product, as opposed to someone thrashing around in the messy process of life? Improvisational music is all about process, about stretching out toward the place where you're bound to make mistakes but where you might actually play a phrase or a line that surprises you with its serendipitous beauty. Sure, there's a ton of behind-the-scenes preparation that goes into it, but "perfecting" your facility with chords, scales, and patterns is just the necessary groundwork. It's not concealment you're after--you're not plastering yourself with foundation to hide musical zits--but revelation. You want to get past beginner's flaws and start making "mistakes" at a higher level. But it does take a certain insouciance, even a shamelessness, to go out there and just play, knowing full well that you're going to fuck up left and right. And shamelessness is a tough quality for the average woman to muster. It's been drummed out of her, starting way back when her mother put her in a short, flouncy minidress and then, illogically, yelled at her for letting her underwear show.

I've been reading *Swing Shift: "All-Girl" Bands of the 1940s*, a book by historian Sherrie Tucker, about the hundreds--yes, hundreds--of full-time, professional female swing bands that started working in the late 1920s and 1930s, gained additional opportunities while male musicians were being drafted to fight World War II, then got mostly shunted aside in the 1950s. As if that discrimination wasn't bad enough, these women have been shunted aside yet again by mainstream music historians who've regarded them, at best, as musical Rosie the Riveters who were patriotic but couldn't really play. It was easy to maintain this gross historical cover-up because most of these bands were never recorded. But with minimal research, Tucker was able to contact nearly 100 still-living (and, in some cases, still-working) women who played swing and who, 50 years later, felt compelled to insist they were *real*




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musicians.

The rigors of female perfectionism fell heavy on these women. Help-wanted ads insisted that women musicians, just like men, know how to sight-read written notes, play by ear, and improvise--but only women had to state their age and provide photographs. Male club owners and promoters were apt to replace players deemed too fat or too ugly, regardless of how well they played. If you were talented, industrious, and pretty enough to be in the famous all-black Prairie View Co-Eds, the all-white Hour of Charm Orchestra, or the mixed-race International Sweethearts of Rhythm, you did all the things men musicians did while wearing a full formal gown, an elaborate hairdo, and high heels. The next time I feel compelled to apologize for a botched chord change, I will stop myself and instead try to remember these women, all dolled up, tottering around in those absurdly impractical getups, and destined to be slighted by history--but doing whatever it took just to get a chance to play.

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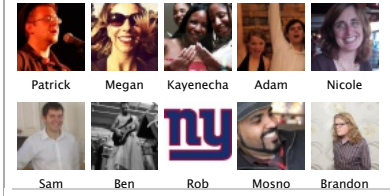
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