

Many of the best-known women jazz performers were pianists. Describe why this is the case, and then discuss how non-keyboard performers like Clora Bryant, Melba Liston, and Sherrie Maricle negotiated space in the jazz world.

**STOP** and write your essay before scrolling down.

Many of the **best-known women jazz performers were pianists**. Describe **why** this is the case, and **then discuss how non-keyboard performers** like Clora Bryant, Melba Liston, and Sherrie Maricle **negotiated space** in the jazz world.

Many of the finest keyboard players in the jazz world were women, and this makes sense because **historically, women have been encouraged to play keyboard** instruments. This trend has been evident for centuries in Western culture, and it carried over into jazz as the genre emerged in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. From the development of piano-based ragtime, and onward to swing and other jazz sub-genres, women remained actively involved as jazz keyboardists. Mary Lou Williams and Lil Hardin Armstrong are just two of the many who achieved fame.

**Other instruments prevalent in jazz, particularly those in the brass and percussion sections, have historically been associated with men.** This is in part **due to** the loudness of these instruments, and in some cases, includes notions about the physical endurance and posture needed to perform. Women who played these instruments remained a distinct minority among members of well-known big bands of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Some women did notably persevere as non-keyboard artists. Trombonist Melba **Liston** performed with well-known groups, and was initially accepted in part because of her superior arranging skills, an asset that benefited her band as she composed and arranged great works. A superior performer as well, she still had to endure derogatory remarks, even from her own bandmates. Liston admitted that traveling with the big name bands was challenging, but she eventually won over her ensemble through determination and superior performance. Clara **Bryant**, a trumpet player, persevered by boldly stepping into situations where jazz performers learn the art, often in informal settings. She noted that she was the only woman who participated in jam sessions in Los Angeles during her youth, for example, and was “tunnel vision” with her music, noting that she was aggressive, and “had nerve.” Despite the taunting she endured in those settings, she pressed forward to learn the art, and enjoyed a long career in jazz.

Drummer Sherrie **Maricle**, a prolific performer adept at both jazz chamber music and big band styles, noted that discriminatory practices for drummers still existed even in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. A decision-point for Maricle was the cancellation of a late-night television show gig, a last-minute decision by the show’s host when he learned that the drummer was a woman. Maricle **decided to found her own gender-segregated big band**, an award-winning ensemble that continues to perform extensively and that also features arrangements by members of the band.

Long-held beliefs about gender roles in jazz are changing, but are changing slowly, particularly at the professional level.