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Great Women in Jazz

As we approach the end of National Women's Month—a time of reflection and remembrance of the impact of women in the past, present and future, and welcome Jazz Appreciation Month in April, we want to not forget the female jazz greats. The history of jazz would not be complete without acknowledging the contributions of the many women who played, and continue to play a role in shaping the music. As a way to continue to support jazz the Ferry Godmother presents a bit of jazz history. For more details, info and events about jazz visit; www.Ferrygodmother.com

Know as the "Empress of the Blues" and often called "the greatest artist American jazz has ever produced" is **Bessie Smith**. Perhaps the greatest classic blues singer of all time, she had an intensity and emotional level to her singing that transcended whatever material she sang. Although her mentor "Ma" Rainey was popular mostly in the South, in 1923 Bessie's recorded *Down Hearted Blues* selling almost 800,000 copies and made her into a national celebrity. Unfortunately personal problems including excessive drinking and the breakup of her marriage led to a decline in her productivity. Her death in 1937 was surrounded by suspicious circumstances when, after a car accident, she bled to death because she was refused entry into a white hospital. The story was based mostly on hearsay and never proven.

Billie "Lady Day" Holiday is thought by many to be simply the greatest jazz singer ever. Her life was not an easy one, from her birth to her death she dealt with racism, drug abuse, rape and prostitution. She worked with many of the great jazz players and is known for her phrasing, emotional intensity and inventiveness. She also worked with several big bands including Count Basie and Artie Shaw. Her largest hits were *Loverman*, *Strange Fruit* and *God Bless the Child*. Billie Holiday died of a drug overdose. After her death, her autobiography "Lady Sings the Blues" was made into a movie starring Diana Ross.

Ella Fitzgerald was called the "First Lady of Jazz" and "The queen of "scat". Ella became known for her incredible longevity, her pure vocal style, her ability to swing and her ability to "scat". She had an incredible range and was able to negotiate wide skips with unerring accuracy. "Scat" is a way for vocalists to improvise like a horn player by putting "nonsense" syllables to a vocal solo. Vocally she there are very few others equally as skilled. She recorded with both small groups and big bands. One of the best known recordings is with the Duke Ellington Orchestra, "Ella and Duke At The Cote d'Azure."

Mary Lou Williams was an all around girl. She could handle herself musically as pianist, composer and arranger. She also had the ability and opportunity to perform in a variety of styles from ragtime to avant garde. She came from the Kansas City tradition of the blues, but hit her stride both as a pianist and arranger with Andy Kirk's *Mighty Clouds of Joy*. She also contributed arrangements to the bands of Duke Ellington, Benny Goodman, and Louis Armstrong. Because she was able to adapt well to new styles of music, she championed of the music of Thelonius Monk, Bud Powell and Dizzy Gillespie. She introduced many to the

history of jazz through her piano playing as a teacher of Duke University where she remained until her death in 1981. Duke Ellington quoted, "Mary Lou Williams is perpetually contemporary. Her writing and performing are and have always been just a little ahead and throughout her career...her music retains-and maintains-a standard of quality that is timeless. She is like soul on soul."

Perhaps no one in this day and age has done more to bring jazz and the history of jazz than **Marian McPartland**. Through her weekly NPR radio program, *Piano Jazz*, she has single-handedly brought the famous and the not so famous performers to the public's attention. Marian's own playing is incredibly beautiful, harmonically advanced and just simply amazing. But it is her ability to make people feel at home on the show, while she fully integrates herself with whomever her guest is. Her programs are a treasure trove of jazz history.

Born in Manchuria **Toshiko Akiyoshi** moved to Japan in 1945 and came to the United States in 1956 to attend the Berklee School of Music in Boston. In 1972 she formed the Toshiko Akiyoshi/Lew Tabackin Big Band with her husband. Her piano playing and compositions integrate a Far Eastern flavor into more traditional forms. Having the influences of her background, her compositions and arrangements for the band are quite difficult and are very unique. Like Duke Ellington she writes for specific players that are in her band. Although the band never achieved a great measure of commercial success, it is on a high artistic plane and well thought of by musicians.

Of course the City of Newburgh has its own "Diva of Jazz" **Lillie Howard**. A Newburgh native, she grew up on the music scene with her mother owning one of the most popular night clubs in the area. Her career went on to produce a million song selling hit in the 50's, "La De Da". Ms. Lillie has appeared with the likes of Chuck Berry, Big Bopper, The Chantels, Jackie Wilson and Frankie Lymon. Although her worldwide touring came to a screeching halt while she raised her 6 children, Lillie continues to perform regularly with her own band throughout the tri-state area at jazz clubs, concerts, private events and jazz festivals. Lillie Howard is a one-woman tour-de-song, with a reputation for wowing her audiences with her unique charm and talent. Gathering fans throughout 50 years of performing, her style has been called "a delightful mix of time", yet she is an original. Lillie's concerts move through whispering to belting out the songs with robust honesty and exciting vibrancy. Her entertainment skills are "dazzling" and "electric," with "a voice that stands out like diamonds from glitter." Lillie Howard is among the world's great entertainers, and she can captivate her audiences like a highly charged magnet. Lillie was a featured artist along with Richard Pryor Jr. at the flagship "Newburgh Jazz Series 2007", a Ferry Godmother Production.

There are many other women that have made a contributions to jazz: Mildred Bailey, Carla Bley, Betty Carter, June Christy, Alice Coltrane, Helen Humes, Diana Krall, Carmen McCrae, Anita O'Day, Sarah Vaughn, Dinah Washington, Nancy Wilson to name a few.

The Newburgh Jazz Series is a free outdoor musical experience organized by the "Ferry Godmother", Aquanetta Wright. Ms. Wright, the Executive Producer of Ferry Godmother Productions states, "this years series will be even bigger and better, with 18 free concerts on the Newburgh waterfront. This event is well on its' way to becoming the eighth wonder of the world. Get ready for some spectacular fundraising events: *Newburgh Jazz-a-thon in April* and the Big Band Swing Fling in May." For details about sponsorship or volunteer opportunities, call 845 568-0198 or visit www.NewburghJazzSeries.com.