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Women jazz musicians are using #metoo and taking a stand against sexism

Every year since 1986, the [Les Victoires du Jazz](#) Awards selects France's best jazz musicians. In 2017 all the nominees in all categories were men. Probably twenty years ago this wouldn't hit the news but today it's inevitable to think there's something clearly off and obsolete about it. Also twenty years ago female jazz musicians would accept it as the norm. Fortunately, not anymore.

The 66-year-old veteran French bass player, Joelle Léandre, wrote an [open letter](#) to Les Victoires, where she sturdily criticises the Awards and asks the obvious question: "How is it possible that in the 21st Century, again and again, not a single woman is nominated?"

Jazz has always been about taking risks and spearheading aesthetic and social revolutions. It served as a fundamental voice against racial and social [discrimination](#), and as a crucial vehicle for promoting democracy and intercultural [dialogue](#).

However, women in jazz – and, in fact, in music – have been traditionally relegated to very specific roles or, in some cases, disregarded altogether. In the past, they would be naturally accepted as singers or pianists, but taking the saxophone, the bass or – God forbid – the drums was clearly off limits and not found suitable for them. The Gender-stereotyping of Musical Instruments, a study conducted by Ables and Porter in 1978 showed that respondents perceived some instruments that are more often used in jazz bands, like the drums, trombone and trumpet as masculine, whereas the flute and violin were seen as feminine. The profusion of inner-circle misogynistic jokes within the music world, as well as the way all-female-bands in the 1930s and 1940s were [publicised](#) only helped feeding the notion that a woman playing the saxophone was at best somewhat exotic and entertaining. Judy Chaikin's 2011 documentary [The Girls in The Band](#) exposes the struggle women had to endure against objectification in jazz.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o6XDjh8gRGg>

Pianists Marian McPartland and Alice Coltrane, saxophonist Jane Ira Bloom, trombonist Melba Liston, and bandleader Carla Bley are some examples of how female musicians have come to be respected for their music, particularly since the [late-1970s](#). Even all female jazz festivals are publicised and perceived in a rather different way. The moto for Dublin based Improvised Music Company's Ban Bam

Today women take also relevant positions in jazz education, research and promotion. Monika Herzig, chair for the Jazz Education Network Research Interest Group (JENRing), or Ros Rigby, President of the Intra-European jazz promoters' Network (Europe Jazz Network), are perfect examples of that. And to be fair, even Les Victoires have awarded female artists in the past. Anne Pacey (drums) and Airelle Besson (trumpet) are among the very few.

But try to think of a movie where you can find a woman playing an instrument in a jazz band. I'll spare you from looking into 2016 La La Land or 2014 Whiplash – they're not in there either. And that is only the visible side of a still rather male dominated world.

Gender discrimination is not exclusive to the jazz world. Every year in January Revolver magazine issues their "[Hottest Chicks In Hard Rock](#)" calendar, where female musicians are depicted in sexy poses with their instruments. At a press conference in June 2016 in Australia, where she was launching her Digital exhibition, [Björk stated](#): "The fact I'm a woman and I can do what I do, it's kind of unique, really. I've been really lucky. But I have been hitting walls. What's really macho, for example, is music journalism. It's really like a boys' club. They like music that is... well, a lot of it is for boys."

In classical music, things aren't much different. [The Vienna Philharmonic](#) didn't accept female musicians to permanent membership until 1997. The harpist Anna Lelkes, who had by then performed with the orchestra for 26 years, was the first to be accepted as official member. But it would take nine more years and negative media to see women being reticently hired.

In 1967, George T. Simon wrote in his book The Big Bands "Only God can make a tree, and only men can play good jazz." Simon started as a drummer and was one of the most influential jazz commentators during the swing era, as associate editor (1935-39) and then editor-in-chief (1939-55) of Metronome. Women sure had proven him wrong way before he wrote that. But he had a voice. The voice that wrote the history of jazz, that validated who was who in the jazz world was a male voice. And [that has changed](#).

Inspired in the [#MeToo](#) movement, several jazz female musicians from around the world founded [We Have Voice](#) against sexual violence and gender discrimination in music. It's quite interesting that the first article in their manifesto online states their "commitment to creating a culture of equity in our professional world." And only then they address the issues of sexual harassment and gender discrimination. Their website features a definition of sexual harassment, useful information on assault, consent and even tips for bystanders.

These are clearly women that have taken a crucial stand, drawing from what was made by other women before them. These are informed, educated, travelled and successful musicians who [will not take it anymore](#). This is a [new generation](#) of women who are pointing out what is absolutely obvious today – equity is inherent to music.