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Uplifts and Downbeats: What if Jazz History Included the Prairie View Co-eds?

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Uplifts and Downbeats: What if Jazz History Included the Prairie View Co-eds?

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Abstract

When Prairie View A&M University celebrated its Founders Day and Honors Convocation on March 27, 2002, the historically black college also revived a chapter of forgotten Texas music history. The Prairie View Co-eds were an extremely popular all-woman big band of the 1940s, who brought audiences to their feet from the Houston Civic Auditorium to the Apollo Theater and back again throughout World War II. Thanks to the hard work and dedication of a good many people across the Prairie View Campus, notably those in the College of Nursing, whose turn it was to organize the convocation, the Prairie View Co-eds brought audiences to their feet again with their vivid stories, distinguished presence, good humor, and poignant histories. Almost unbelievably, the university was able to assemble twelve former members of this fifteen piece band from sixty years ago, flying members in from as far as New York and California, as well as two daughters of deceased members. This celebration of the Prairie View Co-eds provided an unforgettable glimpse into history for everyone who heard the honorees tell of their experiences as black college women playing big band music during World War II, as well as a very special reunion for former band members, most of whom had not seen each other, or visited Prairie View, since the mid-1940s.

KEYWORDS: jazz, history, texas, music, prairie view, co-eds

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Prairie View Co-eds 1945, courtesy of Ernest Mae Crafton Miller.

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“I’m having a hard time believing that this isn’t a dream,” marveled former trumpet player Izola Fedford Collins, who had been trying for years to actualize her dream of a Co-eds reunion. Her efforts, in fact, made it possible for Prairie View to locate such an impressive showing of members. Tentative at first, then in joyous clusters of reunited friendships, Prairie View Co-eds,

now in their seventies, approached one another in the lobby of a Houston hotel. Sometimes they knew each other at a glance, and sometimes they had to ask “Is that you?” “I’m looking for teenagers,” confided one woman, “but, of course, everyone is as old as I am!” Yet, by evening the women who had traveled so far with the band, in the years after the band, and that day to attend

the reunion were a cohesive group, ready to give onlookers a history lesson in what it was like to be the Prairie View Co-eds.

"I don't think you know what we went through," said Clara Bryant, trumpet star of the band, who described for the crowd that gathered to honor the Co-eds the hardships that the band encountered while traveling in the Jim Crow South. She then told the audience how much it meant to her to be remembered at Prairie View after so many years. One by one, Co-eds approached the microphone and shared memories. Dr. Margaret Grigsby, former trombonist, told of the black soldiers who so appreciated their performances on bases, especially since African-American segregated troops tended to be overlooked by traveling entertainment, or sent the "raunchiest of acts." Collins spoke of the pleasures of traveling with the band, of working hard and sounding great, of playing with fantastic jazz soloists like Bryant, and the late alto saxophonist Bert Etta "Lady Bird" Davis. The women told of their memories of the



Bert Etta in the foreground playing alto sax. Prairie View Co-eds in the back ground are (L-R) Bettye Bradley, Una White, and Izola Fedford. Courtesy of John B. Coleman Library, Prairie View A & M University, Prairie View, Texas.

band, talked about what Prairie View meant to them, and told us about their post-Prairie View achievements. Some went on to long-term jazz careers, others became music educators, still others went on to other careers ranging from banking, to food management, to medicine, to Civil Rights activism. Each story met with resounding applause. In one of his last acts before stepping down as President of Prairie View, Dr. Charles A. Hines apologized that the Co-eds had nearly been forgotten, and pledged that the band would be prominently remembered in the new cultural center on campus. The next day, at the luncheon that ended just before the Co-eds boarded the bus that would return them to the airport, a young female student spontaneously stood up and announced, "I want you to know that we will never forget you! Thank you for coming back."

Even if the Prairie View Co-eds are newly indelible in Prairie View memory, they remain forgotten in jazz history, and that is what I would like to explore. This amnesia is not surprising when one considers the many other institutions, musicians, and audiences that have flourished in jazz throughout its history, yet nonetheless remain outside the boundaries of jazz historiography. By saying historiography, rather than history, I am referring to the methods and theories of narrating history, rather than history with a capital "H," as in "what really happened." The Prairie View Co-eds and hundreds of other all-woman bands, for that matter, really happened: we have evidence! Yet documentation does not secure a place in historical memory. I would like to use the example of the lost history of the Prairie View Co-eds to ask why this is. Jazz historiography, I suspect, is

not just about recording styles and players, notes and anecdotes, but about the battles that have been waged in jazz practices over meanings of such things as race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, and nation. These battles have ramifications far beyond the relatively small percentage of people who actually play, listen to, write about, or read about jazz.

The Prairie View Co-eds existed outside the boundaries of jazz historiography in a couple of profound ways: the musicians were women; jazz historiography has not generally incorporated knowledge about women instrumentalists, or gender as a salient category of analysis, and the band was based, not at some Hefneresque swinger's paradise or down-and-out boozy bohemia, but at a historically black college. Its members took a full load of college course work, belonged to the musicians' union, and were professionally booked for weekend gigs and summer tours. Black college bands, women instrumentalists, and unrecorded bands seldom

make it into the purview of jazz history books. To include the Prairie View Co-eds in jazz history would not only expand the roster of players, but would demand a transformation of what counts as jazz history. Lost histories, such as this one, may act as levers to productively nudge the borders of what counts as jazz history and who counts as a jazz musician. To incorporate the band of popular, yet unrecorded, black college women from Texas may help us to develop new ways of thinking about jazz that undermine persistent, damaging race and gender stereotypes so prevalent in jazz historiography

As I have mentioned, the Prairie View Co-eds, like most all-woman bands of their day, were never recorded. To focus on an unrecorded band is already to go against the grain of most jazz historiography, which, as Jed Rasula and other jazz studies scholars have pointed out, tends to record the history of jazz records as if it was the history of jazz¹ (with the notable exception of trumpet player Buddy Bolden, who has managed to retain his reputation as a jazz giant without recorded evidence). Because the sources for most jazz historiography primarily have been records (usually on white-owned labels) and white-owned music trades, much of what has fallen outside the bounds of most jazz historiography includes jazz practices that were meaningful to the black press and to black audiences but not meaningful to white producers, reviewers, and audiences. The Prairie View Co-eds were lauded in the black press, and well remembered by audiences who heard them on campus, and in black theaters, military camps, and dance halls. I'd like to suggest that the unrecordedness of all-woman bands

such as the Prairie View Co-eds, indeed, their exclusion from technologies of success (that would also include mainstream music magazines, jazz history books and films, and even mainstream ideas about what constitutes a “real” band)—their *unrecordability*, if you will, is also a part of jazz history.

The imperative to develop new ways to think about jazz history is not only pertinent to people interested in all-woman bands, historically black colleges, unrecorded bands, Texas music, or the Prairie View Co-eds, but probably to more jazz musicians and jazz

modernist geniuses who care not for the material world, romanticized down-and-outers, though countless jazz musicians have certainly wanted their music to be commercially successful. And certainly, improvement of material conditions of African Americans has historically not been antithetical to black cultural politics. Yet, an aura of “not selling out” and, by implication, “not selling” to the mainstream, has been key to jazz marketability.⁵ I would add that along with ethnicity and modernist notions of the incompatibility of art and commerce, “what counts as jazz” has

...jazz equaling “black,” whose meaning is also constantly changing and in dispute, and non-commercial.

audiences than historians may suspect. I believe that the unrecordability of the Prairie View Co-eds is connected to other kinds of absence, the boundaries of which outline and preserve a problematic stereotype of the “jazz musician” that continues to circulate in jazz historiography (and beyond). This mythical figure is embedded in primitivist notions of black masculinity as isolated, misunderstood, child-like; untutored, raw; disconnected from community and politics, prone to disorderly excesses, intuitive insights and outbursts. Such stereotypical renderings of the figure of the “jazz musician” can be easily recalled in numberless Hollywood portrayals, such as Clint Eastwood’s *Bird*, or literary portraits, such as Eudora Welty’s short story, “Powerhouse.” In the latter, jazz musician is described as “in a trance; he’s a person of joy, a fanatic,” with “a look of hideous, powerful rapture on his face....”² These tropes are not reserved for fiction, but appear not infrequently in jazz marketing, journalism, and—most alarmingly—text books and history books. For Leon L. Dunkley, jazz writers’ desires for “Taciturn and Angry Men in Absurd Hats” is a kind of exoticism not anomalous to, but embedded in the historical tradition of jazz criticism and commentary.³

The term “jazz” has historically referred to many different forms of music, and these forms have varied over time. For this reason, Scott DeVeaux has argued that historical and critical definitions of jazz have depended less on musical dependability and more on ethnicity and relationship to capitalism: jazz equaling “black,” whose meaning is also constantly changing and in dispute, and non-commercial. Jazz has often been understood by those who narrate its history as unsullied by commerce, and romantic in its representation of blackness as electively and rebelliously outside the mainstream (commercial and racial “outsiderness,” then, as “too hip for the room,” rather than barred from the room).⁴ Such definitions often operated as part of the formation of white subcultures based on white fantasies of black culture. As one of many products associated with black people that has been marketed to white consumers by white-owned companies as a non-commercial product, jazz has often been advertised (or used in advertisements for other things) through representations of jazz musicians as “eccentric outsiders,”

also had a great deal to do with gender and sexuality.

We need only to return to the conundrum of unrecordedness. For example, I was recently speaking to a group of jazz researchers about why I thought the Prairie View Co-eds should be included in jazz history. I finished my talk, and they all sat there staring at me, skeptically. And, finally, one gentleman raised his hand and said, “If this band was never recorded, how do you know if it was any good?”

I started to explain that women instrumentalists, particularly horn players and drummers, were seldom recorded, nor were all-woman bands, especially black all-woman bands, and that I didn’t think talent was the only factor at work in who got recorded and who didn’t, and that I didn’t think jazz history should only count the people who had the opportunities to get record contracts, when another gentleman in the front row saved the day by raising his hand.

“I was a member of the men’s band, the Prairie View Collegiates,” he said. “When many of our members started getting drafted, our teacher, Will Henry Bennett started the women’s band to keep music going throughout the war. I was one of those musicians who was drafted and had to leave the band. I knew many of those women because I played with them in the marching band and orchestra, and I’m here to tell you ... the Prairie View Co-eds were outstanding! They were an excellent band!”

The gentleman who knew the Prairie View Co-eds were serious musicians was a musician who had studied at Prairie View, someone who had personal experience that told him that historically black colleges were places where jazz had history, and that some women in historically black colleges, namely the Prairie View Co-eds, played great jazz. But the white male historians who had not gone to Prairie View, who had not heard the Co-eds, were hesitant to believe this band was “serious” or “real” without real proof, i.e., a record, *Downbeat* poll, etc..

Another explanation for why the Prairie View Co-eds disappear from jazz historiography has had something to do with women who are jazz musicians being seen as imitation men, as “not real” musicians, in other words, novelties. As novelties, they would therefore be considered automatically

commercial, so if jazz could not be commercial then women musicians could not be jazz. At least not jazz instrumentalists. For while the prevailing stereotype of the jazz musician revolves around stereotypes of downwardly spiraling, but hip, black masculinity, as discussed by Ingrid Monson in her pivotal article, "The Problem With White Hipness," a stereotype for downwardly spiraling jazzwomen also circulates, embodied in stereotypes about black female sexuality, in the figure of the girl singer with a tragic personal life.⁶ As with the figure of the invariably male jazz instrumentalist, the female jazz singer is imagined as intuitive rather than schooled or skilled, and as emotionally and sexually excessive. This romanticized tragic figure, along with the music, is the product. And like the jazz instrumentalist, the image is not just about biography or history, but about marketing and desire, as demonstrated by these liner notes from a Billie Holiday recording on Verve, *Solitude* (Verve V6-8074).

"To Miss Holiday the word [solitude] must be particularly meaningful since she has known the loneliness and the pain, though often without the contentment that solitude can bring."

Whether or not this depiction is biographically accurate is not the point; this construction of the prototypical female jazz vocalist as alone and lonely, yet emoting from her heart, suffering, yet sexy is how the product, the image, and the record was marketed during Billie Holiday's lifetime.⁷

My interest in a historiography that could include the Prairie View Co-eds and other female jazz instrumentalists is not grounded in hopes of extending to them the compromised star treatment received by some female jazz singers. Nor am I interested in extending to women musicians the mythologies about male jazz instrumentalists as eccentric outsiders. I *am* interested in exploring how "all-girl" bands shake up the gendered and raced, sexist, heterosexist, and racist, contours of jazz historiography by being too far outside the outsider myth to get in. I'm interested in how their relentless estrangement from the paradigm, even after the publication of several excellent books on women in jazz in the 1980s, reveals the constructedness of jazz historiography in ways that tell a great deal about the desires of readers and writers of such narratives, masks the desires of audiences who danced to and applauded "all-girl" bands, and begs



the question of what is at stake in the continued privileging of some jazz artists and overlooking of others.

I am also interested in the ways in which a reissued jazz history that included the Prairie View Co-eds and other “all-girl” bands could enrich our knowledge of women’s history, for instance, women’s negotiations of gender, race, class, sexuality, and nation, during the first half of the 20th century in the United States “All-girl” bands were places where Jim Crow laws were often upheld, but sometimes challenged; where some working class women sought skilled professional opportunities, union representation, and alternatives to menial labor; where some middle-class white women rebelled against the pedestal and the so-called “cult of true womanhood”; and where some African-American women fought for—and represented to black audiences—improved social, political, and material conditions for African-American women and all African Americans. The latter is exemplified by the Prairie View Co-eds, who combined the sights and sounds of a swinging professional black band playing popular hits of the day (at a time when black music had become, for the first time, the predominant pop music in the United States) with images of a group of young black college women for black audiences in segregated dance halls, military camps, and theaters across the south and east.

There was nothing tragic, down-and-out, or lonely about representations of jazz musicians or jazzwomen as presented by the Prairie View Co-eds, not in the eyes of their audiences, not in the praise of the black press. Their status at the college itself was described by bassist Argie Mae Edwards (Medearis) in our 1997 interview: “Oh, we ruled the campus. We were traveling all the time, you know. And we had money! And when we’d go out on weekends, our friends would say, ‘Bring me something back.’ And we’d bring them food back and all of that. Oh, we were something else.”⁸

As black college women who were also jazz instrumentalists, the Prairie View Co-eds were, indeed, something else! In writing about how black women novelists “restructured womanhood” through representations of “race women,” Hazel Carby has pointed out that, while many black women novelists imbued their black female characters with a desire for “racial uplift,” they denied them sensual desire in order to counter a history of racist depictions of black women as nothing but sexual.⁹ Black women who played in “all-girl” bands of the 1940s inherited the same problematic history of representations of black women as “primitive and exotic creatures” that troubled novelists such as Nella Larson, but, as musicians, they also inherited the “alternative form[s] of representation” popularized by powerful blueswomen such as Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith.

In fact, as I have written elsewhere, African-American all-woman bands, and this seems especially true of the band from Prairie View College, may have been unique in their ability to link expressions of political desire of race women with the sensual desire of blueswomen. As black college women and dance band musicians, the Prairie View Co-eds offer a rare glimpse into black womanhood as both a site of uplift *and*

downbeats. Revisiting the performances of the Prairie View Co-eds as they are remembered by musicians, the black press, and black audiences, may prove a rich site for what Farah Griffin has called “Textual Healing,” or a process of reclaiming or re-imagining black female bodies as “engaged in acts of pleasure and political agency.”¹⁰ I quote from their press book:

You Don’t Have To Go To College
Here’s A College You Can Adopt As Your Own.
For These Darlings of Rhythm Will Teach You
All There Is To Know About Swing!!¹¹

The image of jazzwomen as young black college women, cared for by families and communities, and well-chaperoned by their black female professors, works against hegemonic images (desires) for jazz musicians to be dissipated bohemians; for jazzwomen to be tragic, unloved sex objects.

The Prairie View Co-eds were a place where Margaret Grigsby could work as the lead trombonist in a professional band that played the major black venues of the 1940s, and at the same time serve as secretary of the senior class, belong to numerous clubs and sororities, and earn top grades as a pre-med biology major. Where Bert Etta “Lady Bird” Davis could simultaneously be the star alto player, and a public school music major, and secretary of the junior class. The musicians did not just signify upward mobility because they were from families that could afford to send them to college; the band itself, as a professional organization whose members belonged to the musicians’ union and were paid union scale, was a route for college opportunities for poor women with musical skills. Drummer Helen Cole, as the daughter of a widowed domestic worker, recalled: “The band is the *only* way that I had of trying to put myself through school.”¹² She would not have had an opportunity to attend college if it had not been for the band. In addition, she was able to send some money home to her mother. She majored in business a decision that would serve her well many years later when she wished to retire as a drummer and go to work for a bank. The role of black colleges in jazz is not the only neglected history here, but also the role of jazz in black colleges. The existence of extracurricular professional bands where musicians earned union scale made it possible for some African Americans to attain college educations.

To understand what the history of black colleges meant to the Prairie View Co-eds and their audiences, it is important to note that on the eve of U.S. entrance into World War II, Prairie View College was not only the biggest black institute of higher education in Texas, it was the only four-year public college in Texas that African Americans could attend. Founded in 1878, when most white Texans were opposed to higher education for African Americans, Prairie View College shares a proud history with other distinguished black colleges established simultaneously with, and in response to, the rise of the southern system of mandatory segregation known as “Jim Crow.” Before the Civil War, every southern state except Tennessee legally prohibited the education of black Americans, free or enslaved.

After 1865, black education was no longer a crime, but it was still hard to come by as states invented new laws that required black students to attend segregated or “Jim Crow” facilities. As Angela Davis observed, black people who were able to secure educations under these conditions “inevitably associated their knowledge with their people’s collective battle for freedom.”¹³ For African-American women who comprised half the student body of black colleges even before World War II, a college education provided urgently needed alternatives to menial labor, such as domestic work and share cropping. While white women with high school educations could obtain clerical positions, black women were largely barred from such work, but could work as teachers in black schools if they had some college.

Despite the invisibility of historically black colleges from most jazz and swing histories, many black colleges in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s boasted popular dance bands. These bands were sources of pride, as well as entertainment, for black audiences both inside and outside the campus walls. Traveling entertainment from black colleges was already a time honored tradition, dating nearly as early as the establishment of the colleges themselves. Perhaps the best remembered today are the Fisk Jubilee Singers.

Though different from choral groups in obvious ways, when dance bands made up of young black college students traveled off-campus, their performances provided living proof that black colleges were alive and kicking, despite a well-known history of political, legal, and economic obstacles. Activities of black college bands were widely reported in both the entertainment and college sections of national black newspapers like the *Chicago Defender* and *Pittsburgh Courier*.

Well-known and popular dance bands emanated from black colleges, such as Wiley, Alabama State, Fisk, Morehouse, and Wilberforce. Many musicians from these college-based ensembles went on to become famous in the professional music world.

Bandleader Erskine Hawkins got his start in the Alabama State Collegians, as did trumpet player Wilber “Dud” Bascomb, who would later star in Hawkins’s famous professional dance band. Horace Henderson led a dance band at Wilberforce. Drummer Roy Porter and trumpet player Kenny Dorham both played in the Wiley Collegians while students at Wiley College. One of the last wishes of blues singer Charles Brown was, in fact, that

upon his death, donations be made to the Prairie View Music Department. He had played in the Prairie View Collegians. Like most such bands, the Prairie View Collegians was made up of all men. But when the armed forces depleted the band in the spring of 1943, music teacher Will Henry Bennett recruited for a new “all-girl” band. The Prairie View Co-eds were soon playing weekend jobs at Houston’s Civic Auditorium and Down Town Grill, plus nearby military bases.

By the Spring of 1944, they were represented by Moe Gale’s professional booking agency, going on the road each summer on a tour that included numberless one-nighters for primarily black audiences across the South, both civilian and military, including the renowned Tuskegee Airmen, and appeared at black colleges and black theaters, including annual features at New York’s Apollo Theater.

When the Prairie View Co-eds played for black audiences, as they usually did, their college connection was crucial to their popularity. Like the men’s college groups, the Prairie View Co-eds represented the achievements of black education, and, as black college women during World War II, they reminded audiences of the particular gains made by black women at that historical moment. Even those labor historians who are skeptical about the war-time headway achieved by white U.S. home front women generally agree that the labor crisis of World War II constituted a major watershed for African-American women. The Prairie View Co-eds embodied black women’s claims to respectability and upward mobility, qualities historically denied



Helen Cole, Prairie View Co-eds drummer, courtesy of Ernest Mae Crafton Miller

them by dominant society. But, unlike other images of respectable black womanhood available in the black press at the time, serious, heroic figures such as Mary McLeod Bethune, the image presented by the Co-eds was youthful, upbeat; a refreshing picture of respectable, educated black women enjoying themselves. For black audiences, they stimulated race pride. For the same reasons, they posed something of a challenge to the worldviews of some white audiences.

Lead trombonist Margaret Grigsby, later a doctor at Howard University Hospital, recalled one incident on the summer tour of 1944. "We had to play at Sea Island, Georgia, once. It was the first time they didn't call us Prairie View Co-eds. They had a poster up there, 'the Prairie View Prancers.' And I got mad right away. I said, 'What do they mean the Prairie View Prancers? They can't call us Co-eds?'" "Prancers" summoned images of chorus lines, and though the photo on the poster made it clear that it was

black women were not available to just anyone. They were valued and respected and protected. The fact that they were strictly chaperoned as young black women represented a kind of "race pride" that involved claiming an aura of "respectability" usually reserved for white middle-class women.

When former Co-eds spoke of their chaperones, they did so with affection and respect, but also expressed particular joy in how they exercised power and agency in these relationships. Bassist Argie Mae Edwards (Medearis) laughed as she remembered how the young female professors would beg the musicians to request them as chaperones so they have a change of scenery. Those who didn't "act right," in the judgement of the Co-eds, weren't likely to be asked again.¹⁵ While in New York for the Apollo bookings, the musicians stayed in the Hotel Cecil; Minton's Playhouse was in the same building, and other clubs hosted jam sessions as well. Several musicians were able to

The presence of chaperons, on the road, at performances, and in the oral narratives of musicians, indicated that these young black women were not available to just anyone.

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a band being advertised, not a line of dancers, the substitution "Prancers" for "Co-eds" stung. Grigsby had nothing against dancers. Her cousin Blanche Thompson, also known as the Brown Skin Venus, was a member of Irving C. Miller's Brown Skin Models, and would be cheering the Prairie View Co-eds on from the wings during their Apollo Theater debut. What upset her was the fact that the substitution eclipsed the musicians' college affiliation. "At that time, many Southerners refused to call African Americans anything that reflected progress, so calling us Co-eds showed we were college educated."¹⁴

The versions of "jazz musician" and "black womanhood," delivered by the Prairie View Co-eds appealed to black audiences of the 1940s in a way that was unintelligible and even antithetical to dominant white desires for jazz meaning. Surely, this is related to the historical context in which they were never recorded, were ignored by the mainstream (white-owned) jazz press, and omitted from jazz history. Emphasis on the college status of the musicians was a kind of "textual healing" for black audiences that removed the band from dominant definitions of jazz as "untutored free expression." Another site of "textual healing" occurred in the oral narratives when Co-eds alumnae told stories about their chaperones. When the Prairie View Co-eds traveled, unlike most "all-girl" bands, they did so with chaperones who genuinely cared about their safety. While it may be tempting to view the chaperones as yet another layer of surveillance and repression of black female agency, it is also important to think of black women's self-representation in a dominant culture that defined them as hypersexual, up-for-grabs. The presence of chaperones, on the road, at performances, and in the oral narratives of musicians, indicate that these young

sneak by their chaperones and participate in New York jam sessions. Stories about chaperones, both of the musicians being valued enough to be provided guardians, and of claiming some autonomy, are places where the Prairie View Co-eds give us rare glimpses into struggles over gender, race, sexuality, and black womanhood in unrecorded jazz history. It is another place in their history where uplift and downbeats co-mingle.

The Prairie View Co-eds are one of several African-American "all-girl" bands that were extremely popular with the black press and African-American audiences in the mid-1940s, yet were never recorded, were ignored by the white-owned music trades, and omitted from jazz and swing historiography. As a fifteen-piece band (five saxes, four trumpets, three trombones, piano, bass, and drums) that played hits of the day such as, Count Basie's "One O'Clock Jump," Lucky Millinder's "Sweet Slumber," Jimmie Lunceford's "White Heat," Harry James' "Back Beat Boogie," and Woody Herman's "Woodchopper's Ball," complete with improvised solos by such serious musicians as Bert Etta "Lady Bird" Davis, who later played with Dinah Washington's road show, and Clara Bryant, who went on to participate in the famous Central Avenue jam sessions in Los Angeles; as a band that received rave reviews for their performances at such demanding venues as the Apollo, the Prairie View Co-eds would seem to fit the historical criteria for a big band. Yet, they do not fit typical jazz/swing discourse about musicians and bands. In their unique position as black women who were both musicians and college students, the Prairie View Co-eds raise questions not only about what does it mean to overlook African-American women as big band instrumentalists, but what does it mean to downplay the



Ernest Mae Crafton, back stage at the Apollo 1945, courtesy of Ernest Mae Crafton Miller
<http://ecommons.txstate.edu/jtmh/vol2/iss2/4>

importance of African-American institutions in jazz history--in this case the unsung role of historically black colleges? Why do we think of black colleges as homes of choral groups, such as the Fisk Jubilee Singers, who performed arranged versions of spirituals but not of jazz and swing bands, such as those based out of Wiley, Morehouse, Fisk, Wilberforce, and Prairie View? What does the popularity of a band whose title emphasized that the musicians were black college women do to our assumptions about what big bands meant to audiences during the late swing era? And what does the presence of black college women, simultaneously figured as "race women" representing the hopes of African Americans during the war for better living and working conditions, and as big band musicians who played jazz, swing, jump, and blues, traveling one-night stands on the road on weekends and summer vacations, contribute to our knowledge about historically black colleges and African-American women's history during World War II?

As I have stated elsewhere, if jazz history included the perspectives of women instrumentalists, we would know more about jazz and we would know more about women. If jazz history included the Prairie View Co-eds, who and what else would we know more about? We would know more about the role of historically black colleges in jazz history and the role of jazz in black colleges. It would seem more crucial, perhaps, to persistently engage in gender and race analysis of how jazz has been defined, produced, marketed, consumed, and historicized. We would know one 1940s example of an African-American cultural site in which young black women could express both dignity and pleasure. We would know more about jazz cultural formations that included women--what I have called the feminized, devalued, sub-categories of jazz (includes different things at different times and places, but often jazz education, singing, certain instruments like flute and harp that have been associated with femininity, "all-girl" bands). We would be encouraged to pay more attention to unrecorded jazz to produce and study descriptive accounts of unrecorded jazz, as well as analyses of what these unrecorded jazz practices meant to whom and why they were not recorded. We would know more about the circuits of jazz practice that were meaningful to black audiences as sites of "textual healing," though not necessarily acknowledged by white-owned recording companies or magazines that later become the basis for jazz historiography. We would have more awareness of unacknowledged jazz subjectivities that could provide powerful counter-memories to the problematic stereotypes about jazz and jazz musicians that so persistently circulate.

If jazz history included the Prairie View Co-eds, the words "jazz musician" could evoke thoughts of Ernie Mae Crafton Miller, who played baritone saxophone in the 1940s, who now plays piano in a hotel in Austin, Texas, or trumpet player Clora Bryant, who played jazz professionally until the early 1990s, but made only one album under her own name in 1957. We could think of the young Texan black college women upstairs at the Hotel Cecil, slipping out to attend jam sessions as their chaperones slept, as a part of the same world, though differently situated by gender, that includes the famous men of bebop

history who jammed downstairs at Minton's.

The "something elseness" of the Prairie View Co-eds offers considerably more than a separate female jazz history, more, also than jazz history as-we-know it, only co-ed. Rather, they seem to offer a challenge that could reframe--revamp, if you will--the contours of jazz historiography itself. This revamping cannot be achieved by historical overdub, sometimes called inclusion, alone. I propose that this revamping would include a social analysis of unrecordability. A jazz historiography that encompassed all-woman bands and black colleges would be, like the Prairie View Co-eds, "something else." ■

NOTES

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2. Eudora Welty, "Powerhouse," in Marcela Breton, ed., *Hot and Cool: Jazz Short Stories* (London: Bloomsbury, 1991), 29-30.
3. Leon L. Dunkley, "Taciturn and Angry Men in Absurd Hats," *International Jazz Archives Journal*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Fall 1993).
4. Scott DeVeaux, "Constructing the Jazz Tradition: Jazz Historiography," *Black American Literature Forum* vol 25, no. 3 (Fall 1991), 525-560.
5. *Ibid.*, 530.
6. Ingrid Monson, "The Problem With White Hipness: Race, Gender, and Cultural Conceptions in Jazz Historical Discourses," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 48 (Fall 1995): 396-422.
7. Author unknown, liner notes, Billie Holiday l.p., *Solitude* (Verve V6-8074).
8. Argie Mae Edwards (Medearis), telephone interview, November 11, 1997.
9. Hazel V. Carby, "It Jus Be's Dat Way Sometime: The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues," in *Unequal Sisters: A Multicultural Reader in Women's Studies* (2nd edition), ed. Vicki L. Ruis and Ellen Carol DuBois (New York: Routledge, 1994). See also Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).
10. Farah Jasmine Griffin, "Textual Healing: Claiming Black Women's Bodies, the Erotic and Resistance in Contemporary Novels of Slavery," *Callaloo* 19.2 (1996):519-536.
11. Prairie View Co-eds press book, no date. John B. Coleman Library, Prairie View A&M University.
12. Helen Cole, telephone interview, November 21, 1997.
13. Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* (New York: Random House, 1983), 105.
14. Dr. Margaret Grigsby, M.D., interview, Washington D.C., October 30, 1997.
15. Medearis, *ibid.*