Being a jazz saxophonist is not for the faint of heart. This extrovert of an instrument has been one of the foremost instruments in jazz, from Sydney Bechet's soprano and Coleman Hawkins's tenor of the 1920s to Charlie Parker's bebop of the '40s and John Coltrane's expressionism of the '60s.

In the decades since, increasing numbers of female jazz musicians have garnered acclaim on all the instruments of the saxophone family. Jane Ira Bloom is a master on soprano; Claire Daly is an in-demand baritone specialist. Virginia Mayhew started on alto and switched to tenor, while Laura Dreyer did the reverse. Matana Roberts and Anat Cohen are members of a younger generation of players; they both started on clarinet and are well known for their playing on alto and tenor sax, respectively. These women all became saxophonists for a gender-free reason: they fell in love with the sound of their instruments, and with the rich complexity of jazz and improvised music.

The musicians, all of whom are CMA members, count among their influences such pioneering female jazz musicians as pianist/arranger Mary Lou Williams, trombonist Melba Liston, and members of the International Sweethearts of Rhythm, one of the greatest all-female big bands of World War II. Yet the all-male legacy of saxophone colossi prompts inevitable FAQs from journalists, people in the music business, and even admirers: What’s it like being a female saxophonist? How do you feel about the fact that your saxophone role models are all male?

Claire Daly, who has been an active musician in New York City for more than twenty years, has a concise response: “What’s it like to be a white male accountant? Or a short male filmmaker?” If you ask Daly and her colleagues what it’s like being a female jazz saxophonist, throwing in the word “jazz” returns the question to musical concerns, particularly developing a unique voice. “As a woodwind player that’s what you strive for,” says Jane Ira Bloom,
Still, gender issues for female saxophonists—whether questions about their expertise or how they look onstage—keep coming up, as do persistent obstacles. In 2000 and 2001, music journalist Luca Pellegreni wrote a series of indictments about the absence of women in the nation’s premier jazz orchestras, namely the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra (JCLC) and the Smithsonian Jazz Masterworks Orchestra (SMJO). Now, at the end of the decade, there are signs that the situation is improving—one female musician at a time. The SMJO, New York’s Afro-Latino Jazz Orchestra and Mingus Dynasty Band each have a female saxophonist. Among them are Erica vonKleist, alto, and Lauren Sevian, baritone, both of whom attended Manhattan School of Music’s jazz program and represented the new wave of strong female saxophonists. Still, this picture contrasts starkly with America’s top-tier symphony orchestras, whose female ranks have dramatically increased since the adoption of blind auditions; along with it came a focus on gender issues in the jazz world. She says, “I had no choice.” Bloom’s individualism gave her “another way of coming at things. I was improvising a career—as an improviser—from the very beginning of my journey.”

SOPRANO SAXOPHONIST JANE IRA BLOOM has been playing professionally for more than thirty years. Her pristine sound, her compositions, and her pioneering work in electronics and jazz have contributed to a successful, multifaceted career. She was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2007 for composition, won the 2007 Mary Lou Williams Women in Jazz Award for lifetime service, and has been a frequent poll-winner for performance. A longtime New York resident, she is a full-time faculty member at the New School, where she has taught jazz performance and improvisation for the past ten years.

Bloom’s artistry is shaped by sound itself, and this led her into experimenting with electronics, and music and motion. She describes the Guggenheim grant as a true gift: “I’ve had the opportunity to think in terms of larger forms of composition, to create bigger arcs in my thought process.” She has had many rewarding collaborations—among musicians, choreographers, and even with NASA. The first musician to be commissioned by the NASA Art Program, she has an asteroid named in her honor (asteroid 6083 janeibloom).

Bloom’s most recent CD, Mental Weather, displays the fleet creations that are her calling card as a composer. Her quartet—Dawn Clement, piano, Mark Helias, bass, and Matt Wilson, drums—recently performed at the Diet Coke Women-in-Jazz Festival at Dizzy’s Club Coca-Cola (Jazz@Lincoln Center’s club venue). They flew through the music’s mercurial changes with virtuosic dexterity. Bloom considers herself lucky in terms of gender issues in the jazz world. She came into the profession in the 1970s, when the women’s movement was blossoming; along with it came a focus on women in music. “Women’s jazz festivals were springing up everywhere. They played an important part in calling attention to my work,” Bloom recalled. “The feeling in the air was that ‘women can do anything.”

That feeling helped Bloom take initiative early on. She became a bandleader, as well as her own record producer and manager, to get her music out into the world in her own way. In this, she says, “I had no choice.” Bloom’s individualism gave her “another way of coming at things. I was improvising a career—as an improviser—from the very beginning of my journey.”

ALTO PLAYER MATANA ROBERTS, who has been living in New York City for six years, is at a different point in her career. The Chicago Project, an album released last year, shows her strong sound and originality, nurtured by the music she heard growing up in Chicago. Roberts’s father, a political scientist, was insistently about exposing his daughter to the music of his jazz heroes, the avant-garde of the ’60s, including John Coltrane, and to various members of the Chicago-based Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM).

Roberts credits Chicago’s public schools for her musical education. She started studying classical clarinet in elementary school. Her high school jazz band teacher insisted that she learn alto saxophone. She did so, but her true goal was to become an orchestral clarinetist. She did not get much support for this at the predominately white university she attended; however. On weekends, she started sitting in with various jazz groups in Chicago’s active music scene. “Playing jazz saxophone saved me,” says Roberts. Even so, as a female saxophonist, she felt like an oddity. Trying to ignore gender issues, she focused on her playing. The self-discipline paid off, and she got a scholarship to New England Conservatory. Roberts followed the road from Boston, with its vibrant, multi-layered performance scene—enriched by students and faculty from Berklee College of Music, MIT and other schools—to the competitive world of New York. She played freelance gigs there “thanks to the $10 Chinatown bus,” and, encouraged by fel-
Daly, Mayhew and Dreyer came of age musically around the same time. They are the first generation of female jazz instrumentalists who formed a critical mass, and they informally created a resource network that still operates for getting gigs, apartments, and teaching opportunities. All three were original members of Diva, a New York-based, all-female big band whose powerful sound is uncompromising. All Daly’s best friends are female jazz saxophone players. “We share the absurdities of being jazz musicians who happen to be women.” The problem, she says, is that real sexism is hidden, not explicit. There are other issues, too. “Right now the real issue for a life in jazz is creating that life—male or female. There are far more qualified players than places to work.”

Daly’s commitment has been unswerving. She has led her quartet, her core group, for 15 years; she also leads three other groups that work regularly. As a sideman on baritone, she has backed up such major artists as Aretha Franklin and Joe Williams and enjoys the break from being in a central role: “I love being a sideperson. You find out what you need to bring and show up!” She recently released a new CD—her homage to Rahsaan Roland Kirk on her own label, and is chartering along on several projects. There’s Tribute to Toppin, her multi-media work in progress about a female second cousin who made a pioneering dog sled trip across Alaska in the 1930s. She teaches at Lincoln Center’s Middle School Academy, as well as at clinics and jazz camps. And she is developing Outside! Insight, Inc., a nonprofit she founded last that advocates what she calls “gigs with dignity”—a reaction to the expectation that many jazz musicians are happy to work for free. Daly is resilient and upbeat, despite the fact that a life in jazz “takes a degree of courage that could be confused with insanity.”

TENOR SAXOPHONIST ANAT COHEN

Grew up in a musical family in Tel Aviv. She, too, moved to New York from Boston, where she had been a scholarship student at Berklee. The move, in 1999, was made easier because she already had a job line tied into Diva, and had several contacts in the city. Cohen was voted “Rising Star on Clarinet” in the 2008 Down Beat Critics’ Poll and was second top nominee for “Rising Star—Jazz Musician.” For the past several months, she has been going non-stop. After performing with her quartet at several European jazz festivals during the summer, she returned to string of gigs that showed her versatility: a night in a sculpt- ture garden in Katonah, New York, the next at Brooklyn’s Bushwick in a clarinet/guitar duo with guitarist Howard Alden, topped off by a performance with cytoptic Bryant Wilson. She is now promoting her latest CD, Notes from the Village, a jazz musician’s tribute to Greenwich Village. Next spring she will send her father-ahead as recipients of a Residency Partnership grant from Chamber Music America, Cohen and her quartet will travel to present programs and concerts for young people in remote fishing villages and various other locales in southeastern Alaska.

Like the rest of the women interviewed for this article, Cohen cannot envision not being a musician. As a child she studied classical clarinet at the Jaffa Conservatory, and was asked to play with the school’s Dixieland band. Her passion for jazz was instant. She and her brothers jammed together every day (her brothers are both noted jazz musicians, Yuval on saxophone and Avishai on trumpet). While a student at the prestigious Thelma Yellin arts high school in Israel, she was asked to play tenor for the school’s big band. For Cohen, gender as an issue affecting her as a saxophone player was a foreign concept. “I never realized that I was the only woman playing, not just because of my brothers, but because I was comfortable.” While a student at Berklee, she successfully auditioned for Sires in Jazz, an event she's attended sponsored by the IAJE (an organization that, sadly, no longer exists), which had...
“WE WENT TO PLACES WHERE PEOPLE HARDLY EVER HEAR JAZZ, AND THEN THEY NEVER FORGET IT. WHEN WE PLAYED IN BURMA, THERE WERE A FEW PEOPLE THERE WHO HAD HEARD DUKE ELLINGTON DECADES AGO. IT WAS A VERY BIG DEAL!”

— Virginia Mayhew

sponsored several women’s jazz initia-
tives. For the first time Cohen performed at “women-in-jazz” events. “I didn’t even know the term existed.” Touring with Diva gave her an even broader per-
spective. “I thought, ‘Wow, look at all these women—they live, they survive, they make music in New York City.’ They made everything seem possible. It was make music in New York City.’ They

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Diva gave her an even broader perspec-
tives. For the first time Cohen performed at ‘women-in-jazz’ events. “I didn’t even

know the term existed.” T ouring with

were a few people there who had heard Duke Ellington decades ago. It was a very big deal!”

Creating improvised music is what first attracted Mayhew to jazz. “To me the essence of jazz is about improvisation. I am not the perfect band that plays perfect arrangements.” She decided to start an improvisation work-
shop for her teenage students because she realized that they had nowhere to play what they were learning. Her Jazz Workshop at Greenwich House, a community arts school, has been a great success for all concerned.

These days, it seems as though everyone needs a place to play. “I hardly know anybody who is making a living just performing—and I am talking about really fine musicians,” says Mayhew. “People are doing whatever they can do—teaching, doing computer work.” An active sidepro-
session, she has often worked with great jazz veterans, such as trombonist Al Grey and

trumpet player Clark Terry. Mayhew feels fortunate that her main ensembles have been working regularly. “I’ve figured out that the more groups you have, the more you will work.” She leads two different quartets and is the musical director of the Duke Ellington Legacy Band, an ensemble led by Ellington’s grandson, Edward Ellington. Her septet came about through a performance opportunity, and several of her recent compositions were tailored for this new group. The resulting CD, A Single Thank You, displays Mayhew’s richly developed art—as a composer, player and bandleader—and the group’s rapport. She never loses interest in the creative challenges of leading and growing as a per-
former. “Being a jazz musician is not not an easy life, but if it’s what you want

to do, you work it out.”

Asked about problems in the profes-
sion, Daly cites the supply-and-demand issues that challenge all jazz musicians. There are not enough venues for all the accomplished musicians out there—or a big enough jazz audience, especially in today’s economic climate. “Being a woman in jazz these days is just like being a man in jazz,” says Daly. “I know a lot of male musicians out there, too, doing a lot of fancy footwork to survive.” Dreyer concurs that employment issues trump everything else. “When I was coming up, I could foresee a future. The music busi-
ness is so bad now that it’s hard for me to endorse becoming a musician to anybody, even if they are extremely talented.” Dreyer even encourages her most gifted students to develop other ways to make a steady income.

While the employment situation is far from rosy, the attraction to jazz among young musicians is stronger than ever. Jazz programs in colleges and universities have multiplied over the past two decades, and the nation’s top conservato-
ries—Juilliard, Manhattan School of Music, and New England Conservatory among them—all have jazz degree pro-
grams. Unsurprisingly, many of their students are women, as are approximately 40 percent of the high school musicians who compete in J@JLC’s Essentially Ellington big-band competition, one of the foremost showcases for teenage jazz players in the country.

That there is now room at the table for female jazz musicians—whether they are saxophonists or drummers—is evident. Some of the original women-in-jazz initia-
tives are by now longstanding programs. The Mary Lou Williams Jazz Festival, in its 14th year, is a sell-out event at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. Sisters in Jazz is still a premier showcase for emerging female jazz musicians, as is the Diva, now in its 15th year. Interna-
tional Women in Jazz, founded in 1996, has grown as a resource organiza-
tion. And, J@JLC has become more welcoming to female jazz instrumentalists. This past fall, Erica vonKleist was invited to tour with the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra, making her the first female musician to do so. And for the fourth year in a row, J@JLC hosted the Dike Coke Women in Jazz Festival at Dizzy’s Club, which ran for a month this year. Just as sig-
nificantly, journalist Pellegrinelli and Jane Ivy Bloome were featured speakers at a J@JLC forum “Why Aren’t There More Women in Jazz?”—a welcome, if overdue topic for this institution.

Daly, for one, is an optimist, believing that musical gender lines will blur more and more over time. “The real challenge of the jazz life is to keep growing, impro-
vancing, learning, and creating,” says Claire Daly. That challenge has no gender.

Stephanie Stein Crease is a New York-based music journalist and author. Gil Evans: Out of the Cook, her biography of the acclaimed jazz arranger/composer, won the 2002 ASCAP-Deems Taylor Award. Duke Ellington. His Life in Jazz, written for middle school students, was just published.

still an incubator for new groups. She was selected twice for the Jazz Ambassadors Program (then sponsored by the State Department); one tour took her and her group to post-Soviet Era developing countries and the next to Southeast Asia. “We went to places where people hardly ever hear jazz, and then they never for-

get it. When we played in Burma, there were a few people there who had heard Duke Ellington decades ago. It was a very big deal!”

Anat Cohen

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