

Negotiating Power Relations of African-American Women Musicians in the Jazz Scene of the 1920's to the 1960's

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Article Details	ABSTRACT
Article History Received June 5, 2026 Revised July 5, 2026 Accepted July 15, 2026	African-American women whose jazz musicians constitute a double minority, facing gender and racial discrimination in their creative process. Social conditions from the 1920s to the 1960s were heavily dominated by masculinity and the European-American majority, which dictated existing social values. This study aims to uncover the struggles of African-American women jazz musicians as they negotiate the social, cultural, and political structures that limit their participation in the jazz scene, drawing on Bourdieu's field-of-struggle perspective and various gender theories. The research method uses a qualitative approach, grounded in a literature review of various written historical sources. The results show that African-American women jazz musicians were able to build significant positions and contributions through social, symbolic, and cultural capital both in musical practice and within community networks. The presence of alternative spaces, such as jam sessions, churches, and community groups, became an important means of exchanging knowledge and building solidarity among African-American women jazz musicians. Further research could delve deeper into the negotiation of power relations between women jazz musicians who constitute a double minority in other regions and eras.
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1. INTRODUCTION

African-American women in the United States in the 1920s were a double minority based on their identity, namely as part of an ethnic minority and as a subordinate gender. The lives of African-American women in the United States in general have been severely restricted in their rights for the past 200 years (Brown, 1991). In her book, Jane Bingham describes the struggles of African-American women in the 1920s, who endured discrimination across many aspects of their lives. Public transportation, medical facilities, and other public places were generally segregated by race, with separate facilities for people of African descent and those of European descent. Schools for African-Americans received less funding. Furthermore, in the workplace, African Americans were treated poorly by their European superiors, and African-American women tended to be treated worse than African-American men (Bingham, 2011).

The Great Depression in the 1920s devastated the global economy, limiting employment opportunities, especially for African American women. African American women generally worked as domestic servants or agricultural workers (Ware, 2009). Working without a secure income, African American women found it increasingly difficult to obtain adequate food, clothing, and healthcare. Agribusinesses in the United States sponsored programs to teach African American women, who were domestic servants, how to optimize their gardens and raise chickens for meat and eggs (Sigley, 2010). In urban areas, African American women became quilt makers, expanding their activities, collaborating with and training others who wanted to make quilts (Sigley, 2010).

Interestingly, the Great Depression allowed women to thrive in the jazz music scene, which coincidentally flourished during the same era. The 1920s were a time of significant social change, including new regulations on the manufacture and sale of alcoholic beverages. In line with these changes, the Harlem Renaissance emerged, a phenomenon that saw the rise in popularity of African-American artists in literature, fine arts, and music (especially jazz) (Forney & Machlis, 2011). The prohibition of alcoholic beverages led to the emergence of numerous speakeasies, bars that served illegal liquor, catering to various races and groups. These establishments typically played jazz as their entertainment. Therefore, jazz became popular among European Americans (Bingham, 2011).

The rapid growth of the jazz ecosystem in the mid-1930s and the Harlem Renaissance phenomenon created numerous platforms for jazz musicians, including women. Some African-American women were able to pursue careers in jazz despite the social conditions most faced. Bingham notes that African-American female stars such as Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday became renowned jazz singers despite the prejudice and discrimination African-American women faced at the time (Bingham, 2011). Despite this, the position of female singers, in general and of African-American female singers, remained difficult within the jazz scene. Female jazz singers could perform in public, but their "voices" remained controlled by men (Willis, 2008). The "voice" referred to here can be interpreted as men's authority over women singers within the jazz scene.

Based on the explanation of social conditions in the United States in the 1920s and the presence of African-American women jazz musicians, this shows that these women sought to break through social boundaries. This effort to break down social boundaries can then be described through historical reconstruction informed by research in jazz and gender. Historical reconstruction in a scientific context can yield objective evidence (Hakim, 2018). Various events in the past are likened to a jazz music game that seems to sound at the same time. Historians need to isolate each "sound" of history and place it in a single context so that all relationships can be seen together (Brown, 1991).

The historical reconstruction of African-American women jazz musicians in the jazz scene was then chosen for this study, focusing on the 1920s-1960s period. The reconstruction within this time period has scientific urgency, as it aims to provide a picture of the negotiation of gender power relations within a subordinate group in that era. The time period of the 1920s-1960s was chosen in relation to the development of jazz after the 1920s and the feminist movement. The 1920s were chosen as the starting point because it was the golden age of jazz. The development of illegal drinking establishments after the prohibition of alcohol in 1919, or speakeasies, created many venues for jazz, leading to the rapid growth of the jazz scene (Shipton, 2001). In addition, the period from the First World War to the Great Depression is known as the Jazz Age because jazz was a popular genre that reflected the spirit of modernity and the United States' imperialism (Ngo, 2014).

The 1960s, chosen as the endpoint for this study of power relations among African-American women in the jazz music scene, coincides with the beginning of the second wave of feminism. The movement emerged in at least 32 countries between the mid-19th and mid-20th centuries, but these movements focused more on women playing a more effective role (Staggenborg, 2003). The 1960s are considered a time of resurgence for the feminist movement, as efforts to achieve true gender equality began, particularly in the United States. After the 1960s, as the American population became more diverse, women from various backgrounds (including race) began to exert influence through the second wave of feminism (Freedman, 2002). The political movement for racial justice, or the existence of the civil rights movement in that era, influenced the rise of feminism, both from a liberal and a radical perspective (Freedman, 2002).

The historical reconstruction of the negotiation of power relations among African-American women jazz musicians can be viewed through the perspectives of Pierre Bourdieu's habitus and field of struggle. Habitus itself is the adjustment of the reciprocal relationship between the social and physical environment (Jenkins, 1992). African American women jazz musicians can be seen as agents who fought prejudice and discrimination in the jazz scene during the 1920s to 1960s. The "field" for the research refers to the social conditions of the United States from the 1920s to the 1960s and the conditions of the American jazz music scene during that era. The capital that these African-American women jazz musicians may have is musical ability, cultural capital, or symbolic capital as jazz musicians. The jazz music scene itself is a field of subversion in terms of musical performance and language, where power is asserted, appropriated, and undermined (Willis, 2008).

Gender-related thinking can be used in research to demonstrate the relationship between gender identity and the negotiation of masculine power relations. Nichole T. Rustin and Sherrie Tucker highlight the need to dismantle gender bias in writing jazz history. The practice of "listening" for gender in jazz studies shapes the contours of jazz studies, uncovering the boundaries and definitions of what constitutes jazz and an awareness of the existence of visible and invisible bodies within the context of bodily existence in jazz music (Rustin & Tucker, 2008). Tucker and Elsa Barkley Brown argue that writing the history of women needs to be in accordance with the identity context of the women being studied (Brown, 1991). In the context of this research, data collection is certainly related to African-American women involved in jazz. Regarding gender identity,

Judith Butler explains that its formation is shaped in part by the mediating actions of several individuals (Butler, 1988). Gender identity itself is not passively formed solely from bodily characteristics, traits, language, symbolic identities, or the history of patriarchy (Butler, 1988). Willis, based on her research, also stated that women in the jazz music scene are present across social spaces, voicing something as a subversive act against certain forms of domination (Willis, 2008). Willis also links her idea to Judith Butler's performative theory, arguing that, to counter the masculine current in the jazz music scene, women must "rewrite" the definition of their gendered bodies by performing as a subversive act (Willis, 2008).

Bourdieu's thinking is considered capable of sorting out the dynamics of power relations among African-American women jazz musicians in the 1920s to 1960s, thereby giving historical reconstruction scientific weight. Drawing on thoughts on gender and on Bourdieu's field-of-struggle thinking, it can be said that African-American women jazz musicians, as agents in the jazz music field in the 1920s to 1960s, became determinants of history and of the development of gender identity against masculine power in that era. Data search and the writing of the research results for this scientific article will focus on the context and role of African-American women jazz musicians during the 1920s to 1960s, when they faced masculine domination.

2. METHOD

The written works used as data in this study were obtained through online and offline literature searches. The literature obtained must be relevant to the topic discussed in this study, thus requiring a procedure. The procedure for searching and processing the literature used in this study follows that described by Khan et al. (2003). The stages of searching and processing the literature are carried out according to the procedure presented in Table 1.

Table 1. The Stages of Searching and Processing the Literature

No	Stage	Description
1	Formulating research questions that are relevant to the topic being discussed.	The research question in this research is: "How did African-American women musicians negotiate power relations in the jazz music scene of the 1920s-1960s?"
2	Conducting literature searches on online and offline databases	- The database used to search for research data is Google Scholar (https://scholar.google.com/scholar?hl=en&as_sdt=0%2C5&q=african+american+women+in+jazz&btnG=), as well as literature works & books from the personal collection and ISI Yogyakarta. - Literature searches, both online and offline, were conducted starting in July 2025
3	Conducting literature screening with inclusion and exclusion criteria.	Inclusion Criteria: - Literature on the role of women in the jazz scene of the 1920s-1960s. - Literature on the role of women in the jazz scene of the 1920s-1960s. - Literature on the conditions of African American women musicians active in the jazz scene of the 1920s-1960s. Exclusion Criteria - Literature that discusses the roles, relationships, and conditions of African American women musicians in the Jazz music scene outside the 1920s-1960s timeframe. - Literature on non-African American female musicians in the jazz scene.

4	Qualitative analysis and synthesis of various findings.	All findings that meet the inclusion criteria will be analyzed for their essence, and the results will be synthesized into a descriptive-analytical review.
5	Conducting quality control on literature.	The results of the analysis and synthesis will be re-examined to ensure they align with the research topic.
6	Presenting findings from the literature obtained.	The findings will be presented in the results section.

The rationale for using a qualitative approach in social science research is to construct social reality and cultural meaning (Neumann, 2013). Research results using a qualitative approach are richer in description (Palmer & Bolderston, 2006). A qualitative approach captures an emic perspective, namely the participant's perspective on the world (Ginsborg et al., 2021). Based on this framework, this study will reconstruct historical facts about the conditions of African-American women jazz musicians in the United States of America from the 1920s to the 1960s using available evidence. This reconstruction is then carried out using Pierre Bourdieu's field-of-struggle perspective and various feminist concepts. The presentation of the reconstruction results will be descriptive-analytical. The use of descriptive-analytical methods is intended to clearly demonstrate the position of African-American women jazz musicians in the United States in negotiating power relations against the dominance of masculine culture.

3. RESULT

Based on the literature search, 10 articles met the criteria. The list of these works is as follows.

Table 2. The List of Works

No	Title- Writer (Year)	Works Description
1.	"New Thing Gender and Sexuality in the Jazz Composers Guild" - Piekut (2010)	This paper examines the dominance of masculinity in the jazz community (the Jazz Composer Guild) and the role of women jazz musicians within it.
2.	"Black Women Working Together: Jazz, Gender, and the Politics of Validation" - Kernodle (2014)	This paper provides an overview of African American women musicians' efforts to become involved in the Jazz scene.
3.	"The Problem with White Hipness: Race, Gender, and Cultural Conceptions in Jazz Historical Discourse" - Monson (1995)	This paper seeks to demonstrate the incongruities in the perceptions of European Americans during the rise of hip culture, particularly with respect to race and gender. Hip culture, as part of African American culture, also played a role in the development of jazz.
4.	"Be-in-tween the Spa[ces]: The Location of Women and Subversion in Jazz" - Willis (2008)	This paper discusses the discourse on gender inequality in the jazz music scene and the position of women in responding to masculinity as the "language of jazz."
5.	"With Lovie and Lil: Rediscovering Two Chicago Pianists of the 1920's" – Taylor (2008)	This scientific work reviews the journeys of two African American women pianists who developed and influenced the jazz music scene of their time, namely Lilian Hardin Armstrong and Lilian Austin.
6.	'The History of Jazz' - Gioia (2021)	This book traces the history of jazz from the early stages of Africanization of music in America to its development in the fusion era.

7.	"Jazz History Remix Black Women from 'Enter' to 'Center'" - Tucker (2017)	This article critiques the overly masculine-centric nature of jazz history writing.
8.	"A New History of Jazz" - Shipton (2001)	This book traces the history of jazz through the ages. Historical information related to African-American women jazz musicians can also be found in the book.
9.	"A Cultural History of Women in America: The Great Depression: The Jazz Age, Prohibition, and Economic Decline" - Bingham (2011)	This paper provides an overview of the conditions of women in the "jazz age", namely when jazz was experiencing its golden age in the 1920s to 1940s.
10.	Queering Kansas City Jazz: Gender, Performance, and the History of a Scene- Clifford-Napoleone (2018)	This book describes the state of jazz in Kansas City until the 1920s.

(Source: primary data, processed by Alexander, 2026)

All findings will be narrated in a descriptive analysis that depicts the negotiation of dominant power by African-American women jazz musicians from the 1920s to the 1960s, synthesized from research findings. The discussion of these findings is as follows:

African-American Women Jazz Musicians and Their Conditions

The jazz music scene in the United States from the 1920s to the 1960s was heavily dominated by men, with women in subordinate positions. In general, during this era, women in the jazz scene were considered suitable only as singers, not as instrumentalists. Men jazz singers who could play instruments tended to be better known as instrumentalists, such as Louis Armstrong and Chet Baker. Most women jazz singers, although some were also pianists, were known only as vocalists, while Armstrong and Baker were more famous for their trumpet playing (Willis, 2008). The stereotype of instrumentalists as masculine and vocalists as feminine was very strong during the golden era of jazz. This stereotype forced women musicians to "become men" to succeed in their careers. Mary Lou Williams, an African-American jazz musician, emphasized that women had to be highly skilled to be seen as musicians, not just as women (Monson, 1995). However, this masculine-dominated jazz scene was still less dominant than the classical music scene, which was even more masculine. Tucker, in his writing about the stereotypical condition, said:

"...For instance, even as the dominant culture may have exerted a strong message that it was not "ladylike" to work for wages, many women, of course, needed to work. It may not have been ideologically "ladylike" to play trombones or trumpets, or to enter the spaces where jazz was played, but for some women, playing jazz was not considered wholly transgressive in the local sense, but rather a viable way to earn a living. African American women who played classical music often found that careers in jazz were more open to them, despite the genre's masculine image as we may think of it today, and even though classical music was considered more "ladylike" even within their own cultural group. (Tucker, 2017:265).

The rejection and denial of women's abilities in jazz music influenced the acceptance of women musicians in the jazz music scene. Piekut, in his book, described male dominance in the Jazz Composer Guild community in the United States around the 1960s. Bill Dixon, one of the founders of the Jazz Composer Guild, stated that they felt there was no sexism in the restrictions on women and that playing and practicing music for hours was something only men could do well (Piekut, 2010). The analogy of instruments with masculinity also influenced the separation of instrumentalists from vocalists. Melba Liston's presence as a jazz trombonist posed a threat to male jazz musicians in her band. Some players convinced Liston to lower the quality of her performances in the band because the musicians felt their "masculinity" was threatened by a woman playing an instrument not common for her gender (Willis, 2008). Mary Lou Williams, despite having excellent technique, was still better known as the "jazz musician's wife" (Clifford-Napoleone, 2018). Women jazz musicians were also considered to lack the power to survive in the jazz music scene. A myth that developed during jazz's early years held that women jazz musicians would compete with one another and not get along (Kernodle, 2014).

The highly segregated gender status of African-American communities placed a significant burden on African-American women jazz musicians. However, African-American women were considered more "docile"

than African-American men, making it easier for them to assimilate into society. A study conducted in the mid-1960s revealed the idea that assimilated African-American women were considered moral and capable of "taming" African-American men (Monson, 1995). However, when compared to women of other races, African-American women jazz musicians were not the preferred choice. While renowned bandleader Artie Shaw acknowledged and admired Billie Holiday's vocal abilities, he added Helen Forest, who was of European descent, for performance and media broadcasting, diminishing Holiday's role (Willis, 2008).

The jazz music scene around the 1920s, closely associated with clubs and nightlife, often associated women musicians with sexual objects and prostitution. Clubs and speakeasies of the era consistently featured jazz musicians, including women. Large clubs like the Cotton Club in Harlem, New York, regularly hosted famous singers of the era such as Ella Fitzgerald and Billie Holiday (Bingham, 2011). Despite this ecosystem, some women jazz musicians were involved in prostitution. Tucker, in her writing, states that gender-based thinking at the time certainly did not consider prostitution to be appropriate for women. However, economic conditions forced them to do so regardless of their musical abilities (Tucker, 2017). However, not all women jazz musicians were involved in prostitution. Women jazz musicians from the 1920s to 1940s always kept their distance from club dancers to avoid being perceived as part of prostitution (Tucker, 2017).

Capital of African-American Women Jazz Musicians 1920s to 1960s

African-American women jazz musicians, confronting masculine domination, used symbolic, cultural, and social capital as tools to negotiate the prevailing power. The conditions of masculine domination in the jazz scene from the 1920s to the 1960s became a field of struggle for African-American women jazz musicians. Gender and racial inequality seem to be normal, or in the context of Bourdieu's thought, a doxa that needs to be dismantled.

The social environment and political dynamics certainly provided the initial capital for African-American women jazz musicians to access musical knowledge and suitable musical careers despite the segregation and subordination of African-American women. Churches for African-American communities in America became places for women musicians to practice their musical skills. Women could play important roles in church music services and also became places to practice music theory and musical skills, especially on the piano (Tucker, 2017). The church became an ideal place for African-American women to learn music because, in general, access to music learning was quite difficult for them in the early 20th century (Taylor, 2008). Lil Hardin Armstrong, a jazz pianist who developed in the 1920s, discovered the taste of African-American music in the church (Taylor, 2008).

Recognition by other musicians of African-American women jazz musicians also served as a valuable asset in their careers, especially when those musicians were influential. In 1933, music producer John Hammond heard Billie Holiday singing in Harlem, New York, and gave her a favourable review in *Melody Maker* magazine, helping to boost Holiday's career (Tucker, 2017). Mother-daughter trumpet players Dolly and Dyer Jones, who were also featured in the media in the 1920s, also received media recognition, including coverage of African-American trumpeters (Tucker, 2017). In the context of big bands, Holiday, although not the first African-American singer to perform in a big band orchestra whose members were all of European descent since 1938, helped improve Holiday's reputation among European-descended musicians by contributing for nine months to Artie Shaw (Shipton, 2001). Big bands of the same era also frequently recruited women instrumentalists of African descent, even though these bands were always composed entirely of men. Big bands led by men of African descent, such as Gerald Wilson and Lionel Hampton, recruited Melba Liston and Elsie Smith. In contrast, Woody Herman, a man of European descent, recruited Billie Rogers and Marjorie Hyams, both of African descent (Tucker, 2017). Other musicians also gained recognition through competitions. Ella Fitzgerald won an amateur jazz singing contest in 1938, launching her career (Gioia, 2021). Sarah Vaughan won an amateur jazz singing contest at the Apollo Theater in 1942, and numerous orchestras offered her work from there (Gioia, 2021).

Social capital, such as marriage, enabled African-American women jazz musicians to advance their careers. Before her marriage, Mary Lou Williams studied piano, composition, and harmony while living in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. However, her career began to take off when she married John Williams, a saxophonist who worked in a band (Gioia, 2021). Williams was also able to play music for silent film producer Marion Jackson initially because of her marital status, although her abilities were eventually recognized as a talented player (Gioia, 2021). However, Williams did not feel that her marriage determined her career path and continued to strive to give her best in her musical abilities (Clifford-Napoleone, 2018). Williams generally did not perceive any particular difficulties in the jazz music scene as a woman instrumentalist (Taylor, 2008). Lil Hardin Armstrong also dabbled in composition, collaborating with her husband, Louis Armstrong, on her work (Taylor, 2008).

Negotiating Limitations of the Field

Perceptions about gender and the jazz music scene until the 1960s required African-American women musicians to possess a strong foundation in knowledge and strategy. In general, African-American women felt they could not afford to be foolish because no one could protect them except themselves (Kernodle, 2014). African-American women also needed to understand certain strategies to survive. When Billie Holiday was found dead in 1959, hospital staff found \$750 in one of her legs while her bank account only had 70 cents left (Gioia, 2021). Holiday's actions could be interpreted as a form of vigilance against the prevailing system. Regarding these strategies, many women, including those of African-American descent, avoided playing in all-female bands for fear of being ostracized by the jazz community (Willis, 2008).

The subordinate position of women's identity and skin color forced African-American women jazz musicians to minimize or conceal their identity. Only women musicians who can play exceptionally well can be considered equal to men or "exceptional women" (Kernodle, 2014). Some women musicians also had to claim Spanish ancestry to play in predominantly European-descent bands (Taylor, 2008). In some southern states of the United States that enforced racial segregation, African-American female musicians in all-female bands had to pretend to be of European-American descent (Taylor, 2008).

The socio-political dynamics in the United States from the 1920s to the 1960s ultimately provided space for African-American female jazz musicians to thrive. The development of jam sessions as centers for acquiring knowledge and jazz-playing skills after World War II provided an excellent alternative learning ground for African-American female jazz musicians (Tucker, 2017). Female musicians (including those of African descent) gained a place in various bands because many musicians were conscripted into the military in the 1940s. African-American women jazz musicians then continued to strive to maintain their position as musicians after male musicians returned from military service after World War II (Tucker, 2017).

African-American women jazz musicians worked hard to advance their careers. Ella Fitzgerald secured a position as a bandleader after the previous leader died around 1939 (Gioia, 2021). Mary Lou Williams had to work as a driver and staff writer before joining the band (Gioia, 2021). Despite her marriage to a musician and her extraordinary musical abilities, Williams still had a difficult career path.

The relationships among women jazz musicians created a unique dynamic for negotiating the highly masculine conditions of the jazz scene. African-American women jazz musicians formed a network for the exchange of knowledge centered around three points: church, home, and community (Kernodle, 2014). Great female musicians such as Mary Lou Williams and Melba Liston also supported one another musically, socially, economically, and politically, creating a "safe space" for each other (Kernodle, 2014). African-American female jazz musicians also collaborated with musicians of other descent, such as those of European descent. Jessie Turner, an African-American, once helped her trumpeter, Toby Butler, a European-American, who was arrested for violating Georgia's racial segregation laws. Turner then pretended to the police that Butler was related to her (Monson, 1995).

Contributions and Achievements of African-American Women Jazz Musicians from the 1920s to the 1960s

African-American women jazz musicians have made contributions both within and outside of music. Lil Hardin Armstrong and Lovie Austin actively contributed to the Chicago jazz scene in the early 1920s (Taylor, 2008). Ella Fitzgerald became a bandleader whose reputation was on par with that of other male bandleaders, such as Duke Ellington and Chick Webb, both of whom developed from Harlem, New York (Gioia, 2021). The all-female big band, the International Sweethearts of Rhythm, toured the United States and European countries and secured a contract with the Victor Label (Gioia, 2021). Tucker also wrote, based on the musical contributions of African-American women jazz musicians:

"..It is impossible to know what jazz would sound like today without Billie Holiday's phrasing, timbre, and timing; without Mary Lou Williams' shaping of the distinctive Kansas City sound through her rolling piano swing and her lasting touch on jazz arranging and composition of swing, bebop, and religious concert music; or without the participation of countless other women, both known and unknown, whose lives are woven through the entire history of this music. (Tucker, 2017:256).

The contributions of women jazz musicians to matters beyond music were often connected to social and political contexts. All-female bands sought to create jobs for women in the music ecosystem, both of European and African descent, especially in the 1930s and 1940s (Tucker, 2017). In the 1960s, some women who joined jazz ensembles also participated in various civil movements, including struggles for Afrocentrism, cultural nationalism, and the liberation of third-world countries (Tucker, 2017). These contributions demonstrate that the process of negotiation within the dominant cultural context was not only about the field of music itself but also about other fields that contributed to women's lives

4. CONCLUSION

The study's findings demonstrate that African-American women jazz musicians negotiated masculine dominance through a range of means, including symbolic, cultural, social, and economic capital. Jazz, as a dynamic form of music, can shift boundaries within social stigmas. The jazz music scene from the 1920s to the 1960s demonstrates this dynamism. Jazz, a music of African descent, was recognized and enjoyed by all Americans at the time, both of European and African descent. However, interestingly, despite jazz's dynamism, women had to work harder to play a significant role in the jazz scene of that era. However, this hard work paid off with numerous African-American women jazz musicians who made significant contributions to the jazz scene, including Ella Fitzgerald, Lil Hardin Armstrong, Melba Liston, Mary Lou Williams, and many others. This research can be further developed by exploring historical references from various sources.

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