

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

The Girls in the Band Get Down

Sophia Stein · Thursday, August 1st, 2013

Judy Chaikin's marvelous documentary *The Girls in the Band* spotlights the most accomplished women musicians of the big band era and jazz scene, from the 1920's, up until the present day. The film first came to my attention through the numerous email postings I was receiving from members of The Alliance of Women Directors in Los Angeles, who could not stop showering Chaikin with praise for her achievement. The film, which enjoyed a one-week qualifying run for Academy Award consideration this past June has been held over in the Laemmle theatre in Pasadena ever since.

The trajectory of Chaikin's career is linked to the cruelty she faced as a trumpeter in junior high school from "the boys in the band." As a result of their unpleasant treatment, Chaikin quit the band, and turned her sights on drama. She acted in professional theatre, television, and film in Los Angeles for fifteen years, until she grew restless: "It was a life of sitting around and waiting for other people. I am much too active a person for that," she confides. Chaikin resolved to try her hand at directing. Undeterred and determined to get on with the making of her own film, Chaikin purchased some camera equipment and started interviewing people. She made *Legacy of the Hollywood Blacklist*, which was nominated for an Emmy (1988) and launched her film directing career. In 2004, Chaikin received her second Emmy nomination for the documentary *Building on a Dream: The NoHo Art Project*. When Chaikin learned from a friend about big-band drummer Jerrie Thill, who was then in her nineties, Chaikin became inspired to find out more and take on *The Girls in the Band*.

The Girls in the Band not only provides long overdue attention to deserving female giants of jazz — among them Marian McPartland, Mary Lou Williams, and Melba Liston — the film also explores the social and historical underpinnings that sometimes foster, more often frustrate opportunities for creative expression and professional achievement by women.

Only just now, the filmmakers are courting distributors for wider release. Hopefully not before too long, you will have an opportunity to see *The Girls in the Band* in a local theatre, and moreover to purchase the phenomenal sound-track.

Sophia Stein: *The Girls in the Band* begins with a shot of the famous photograph, "Harlem, 1958."

Judy Chaikin: The photo was taken by Art Kane on August 12, 1958. Early in the morning, he gathered all the great jazz musicians in New York of the day, together on the steps of a Harlem Brownstone — 57 jazz greats, including Dizzy Gillespie, Gerry Mulligan, Gene Krupa, Rex Stewart, and Count Basie. In the photograph, there were just 3 women. One of them was singer, Maxine Sullivan, but very few people would have been able to recognize the two women who were standing in the front row. So that becomes the jumping off point for the film: this photograph that

is iconic in the music business and this question, “Who are these two women, and why are they in this picture?”

S2: In terms of structuring the material, what did you know that you wanted to include from the outset, and what discoveries did you make along the way?

JC: I knew that I wanted to go from the early years of jazz up to the present day — to show that not only what had happened in the past was unknown, but that what is happening in the present day, is also unknown. My background is theatre, and the three act structure is built into my DNA. Once I found those three acts and began to flesh out what had happened in the world in general, that provided a foundation for the story. I didn’t anticipate that the film would have so much social relevance, but it was impossible to separate what had happened to these women from what was going in the world at large. The Second World War gave these women the opportunity (like Rosie the Riveter), to step into the limelight and show what they could do.

S2: The soundtrack for the film is phenomenal. It is almost wall to wall music. I can imagine that the task of securing music clearances has been gargantuan?

JC: That was the whole last year and a half of our work, trying to raise the money and secure the rights to the music. We have an angel named Hugh Hefner, who came through, helping us pay for our music rights.

S2: How did you get Hugh Hefner on board? How did that introduction come about?

JC: At one time, I was on the board of the IDA (The International Documentary Association), and I had a conversation with former Executive Director, Sandra Ruch (who was really in touch with everyone in the documentary community). “Sandra,” I asked, “where do you think the pockets of money are for a documentary like this?” Sandra provided me with a direct contact to the trusted right-hand man of Hugh Hefner. “Call and see if Hefner might be interested — because he’s got the Playboy Jazz Festival here every year, and he does have a lot of women in that festival!” she said. So I put in that call. The gentleman politely declined, “Well, Hef really isn’t doing anymore film work, he is trying to stay focused on music and his other enterprises.” “I can understand that,” I countered, “but I think he might enjoy just seeing this 8-minute demo reel.” “All right, send it over,” he conceded. So I Federal Expressed it over, and the very next day, I got a call: “Judy, are you sitting down? Hef loves your demo reel, and he’s going to help you!” Hefner matched and doubled a grant from Herb Alpert, which allowed me to start shooting. Hefner actually hosted a fundraiser for me up at the Playboy Mansion. Then at the very end, when I just couldn’t get any farther with the music rights, Hefner came in and picked it all up.



Roz Cron, Hugh Hefner, and Clora Bryant at the Playboy Mansion fundraiser for 'The Girls in the Band'

S2: Working on the film, did you discover any personal favorites that have become part of your music library?

JC: I never even knew about Vi Redd. Vi Redd was just a monster player! I knew very little about Mary Lou Williams, and I have come to love and respect her. I never knew how soulful Clora Bryant's music was. So, I made a lot of wonderful discoveries.

S2: Robert Koehler in his Variety review praising your film predicts that it may “prompt a rewrite of jazz history.” What do you feel about a filmmaker’s responsibility to history and its telling?

JC: There has been a lot of history written about jazz, but these women were just left out of it because it was written mostly by men. It's not that they weren't telling the truth, but they didn't have all the truth. I just say, follow your heart as a filmmaker, and if your heart is in righting some historical wrongs, then that's a very valuable thing.

S2: At the San Francisco International Film Festival this year, for the first time, new Executive Director Ted Hope, produced a seminar called A2E (“Artist to Entrepreneur), with the focus on direct distribution for filmmakers. Peter Broderick was one of the presenters. I noticed that Peter is credited as a Distribution Strategist on *The Girls in the Band*, and I was wondering how Peter’s input impacted your choices this time out?

JC: Peter was invaluable to us. He guided us through the whole first year of our festival run. He told us how to promote the film, where to put it, and who was important. Everything has changed so drastically in the past five years; the way that I used to release films, no longer has any relevancy. It's a whole new world. So it was Peter who brought us all the way up to our present situation, where we are now able to select from interested distributors. But there is a whole world to conquer before you get there, and any misstep along the way can have severe implications. If

you sell your film off too early to any one platform, you are going to harm yourself along the way. It's a real poker game. You can't play your hand out too quickly. Using the "Do-It-Yourself" model to earn some money from your film along the way, is vital to keeping it moving forward. We have seen, however, that with the "Do-It-Yourself" model we could be involved working on the distribution for the rest of our lives. The response has been so enormous, that we would need at least five additional staff persons to seriously address every request that we've received. So now, we feel it is time for us to bring in a distributor.

S2: You have talked about how talent can only carry one so far; that mentorship, being invited into the club, is critical. Were there male mentors along the way, who have opened that door for you as a director?

JC: Herb Alpert was one of the first financiers of my Blacklist film. After I had finished *Legacy of the Hollywood Blacklist*, the Screen Actors Guild, the Writers Guild, the Directors Guild, and AFTRA, decided to produce a star-studded event at the Academy to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Blacklist for which they were planning to reinstate the names of all the blacklisted writers onto their films. Paul Jarrico, who had been one of these blacklisted writers, went to bat for me, claiming that I was the only director that he would trust with the job. I got to work with some incredible people — Billy Crystal, Kevin Spacey. Over the years, my executive producer, Mike Greene, has been so supportive; George McGrath, Marv Kupfer, and of course, film angel Hugh Hefner! Directing jobs are so few and far between for men and women, the director-to-director competition is fierce! So while I haven't usually looked to other directors for support, there have been many producers, writers, and sometimes actors, who have been influential.

S2: Have women mentors figured prominently?

JC: Writer Gloria Goldsmith was doing a political stage play about the history of women in Los Angeles, and she inquired one day if I knew a woman director who I thought could work with a bunch of Hollywood stars. "Yes. Me!" I suggested. "I'm planning to quit acting and start directing." Gloria gave me a shot, and I ended up directing Jane Fonda in that project. It was a supportive gesture and a leap of faith that Gloria took in hiring me.

S2: You've observed that "it's hard to keep hold of what you were born to do, but there is no way to avoid it coming back to haunt you, so you might as well just honker down and go for it!"

JC: You get into this business, and everything tries to divide you from who you are and what you want to do. In the end, if you don't follow your star, it comes back to haunt you. You feel you've wasted your life doing meaningless stuff, and that the thing that's inside of you has never gotten to come out and shine. You know, your little light has got to shine, whatever it is. My life has just all come together in this project: my early life studying music and then my life with my husband and family in the world of music; my pursuits as a director and as an artist; and my experience of the women's movement and the changing roles for women — it all just came together!

S2: The Women In Jazz Festival in Kansas City, that you document in your film, do you know what became of it?

JC: It dissolved after about seven years. It went from the hands of the originators into the hands of a board of directors. It's always the human originators that make things what they are, and once they leave, it's over. I am noticing that same thing right now at the Kennedy Center where there has been a Mary Lou Williams Jazz Festival for over fifteen years, and the motivating factor

behind it all was Dr. Billy Taylor, who passed away in 2010. I've just learned that this year for the first time, The Mary Lou Williams Jazz Festival is no longer going to be a women's jazz festival, it is going to be just another jazz festival. Well, that's nice, but there are lots of jazz festivals, but there are no women's jazz festivals that I know of.

S2: In doing so, it's almost as if they are implying that we are living in a "post-gender" age.

JC: Yeah, right. [She laughs aloud.] It's laughable. You know, who's saying that? The gender that's in power. We're fighting the good fight every day. We're making inroads, we're getting our faces out there, we're doing our work, we're getting support from a lot of incredible men. But there's no level playing field. We all know that.

S2: One thing that I do find encouraging is the way that the technological revolution is democratizing access. All types of people are gaining access to the tools of production that were previously available only to "members of the club."

JC: I remember when I was first starting to make a film, it was like putting together a manufacturing company. I thought to myself, "How the hell am I going to do this?" I said, "I don't know how I'm going to do it, but that's the task before me." And so you start ... you start collecting your people, you start collecting your equipment, you start collecting your knowledge. It was very difficult then. It certainly is much easier now.

S2: One of the epiphanies that I had while watching your film was that sometimes sexism is so subtle in the workplace that you are not even aware of it when it is happening. Was it your intention to help women to contextualize some of their experiences?

JC: We tried not to be heavy-handed about anything, just let people tell their stories, and let you draw your conclusions. Every woman out there has had some experience that is similar to something that happened to these women. That's why I really loved making the film, because it was just like my experience as a director. It's not overt. It's very, very subtle. And that is the hardest kind of prejudice to fight.

S2: The final tableau in the film, is such brilliant, poetic justice. When did the idea for that tableau come to you?

JC: That came to me about three years into the making of the film. When you make a documentary, you don't know what you are going to be making. You start gathering together all the pieces of material, and it's like weaving a mosaic. You have an idea of what you're working on, but the actual crystallization of the idea doesn't come until you're well into it. We had done a rough cut of the material in a linear fashion. I knew that I wanted an idea that would pull the whole film together, but I hadn't found it yet. I had interviewed Marian McPartland, and I thought that it was important that I get a copy of that photograph, "Harlem, 1958," in there. And then Marian said something in her interview. She said, "I don't know where the women were? ... there were plenty of them around." And it just rang a bell, and I thought, what if there had been a picture of all the women jazz musicians, I wonder if it would have made a difference?

[More information regarding 'The Girls in the Band.'](#)

Upcoming Screenings:

Laemmle Playhouse 7 – Pasadena, CA – August 3 & 4, 2013

The Art Theatre of Long Beach – Long Beach, CA – August 11 and 24, 2013

Charlie Parker Jazz Festival – New York, NY – August 22, 2013

Photos: Top, The Girls in the Band, Harlem 2008, features top women jazz and big band musicians

(and three men who championed them): it's famed predecessor, the Art Kane photo Harlem 1958, was the inspiration behind this photo shoot; below, Roz Cron, Hugh Hefner, and Clora Bryant at the Playboy Mansion fundraiser for 'The Girls in the Band.'

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