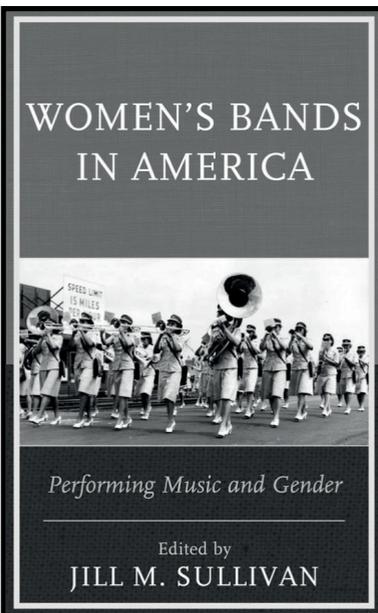


## *Unfavorable Winds, Great Women*

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*Women's Bands in America*. Jill M. Sullivan (ed.).  
London, Rowman & Littlefield, 2017.



*Women's Bands in America* was launched in 2017. It came late but better late than never. Even if this publication soon became a reference in the field, it also evinced to what extent this topic had hitherto been neglected in the academic arena. The editor and author Jill M. Sullivan concluded that all of these women were not forgotten by accident, but they were intentionally consigned to oblivion «due to the fact that it was women forming the bands and men writing the story»<sup>1</sup>. This fact is hovering around from the very beginning of the book: with so many all-female bands existing from the end of the nineteenth century until nowadays, the reader is struck by the deafening silence about the matter. Definitely, there must have been some hidden agendas...

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<sup>1</sup> *Women's Bands in America*. Jill M. Sullivan (ed.). London, Rowman & Littlefield, 2017, p. 350.

Given this challenging scenario, which is the plan how was the issue approached? *Women's Bands in America* is a multi-author book coordinated by Jill M. Sullivan, who opens, intersperses several texts, and concludes the book. «Women and/in bands» serves as a bond for the whole volume from the Golden Age of Bands (1870-1920) until nowadays – although, this time frame receives scarce attention, just two articles at the end of the book. Writers touch a wide range of topics linked to gender: race, costume, iconography, advertisement, job market, cultural industry, etc. The fact of putting all these perspectives together is one of the strengths of Sullivan's strategy as editor. These topics are intertwined and are essential to understand the limits and freedoms that women had in all kinds of bands.

In order to find a place in this «history», which was traditionally masculine, women had to learn how to trace their own paths, away from men. Creating a brand new all-female space was the only way to express themselves as woodwind/brass musicians,

to avoid a hostile social answer and not to invade «men's domain». This is the reason behind Helen Butler's foundation of *Her Ladies' Military Band* or Mary Lou Williams's *Girl Stars*. This explains the fact of having girl bands separated from boys in schools around America and forming only female from bands. In a few words, female segregation was the only option to overcome gender conventions regarding blowing, wind instruments and women, and thus, the only way to thrive as performers.

Women with great personalities made these groups prosper. There is a long list of them across the book: namely Helen Butler<sup>2</sup>, Linsey Williams<sup>3</sup>, Gladys Stone Wright<sup>4</sup>, Mary Lou Williams<sup>5</sup>, Edna White<sup>6</sup>, etc. All of these women had entrepreneurial, organizational and motivational skills and a strong sense of leadership, but always grounded in a community spirit. However, what really led them to success was their resilience. In other words, their ability to adapt to every environment and seize the opportunities they found across the way.

They were aware of the fact that they lived in a men's world, but they

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<sup>2</sup> Butler was violinist but also conductor of the Talma Ladies' Orchestra of Providence around 1890 and afterwards, named it Her Ladies' band. Please see: *Women's Bands in America...*, p. 21.

<sup>3</sup> A performer, leader, conductor and orchestra teacher who left a great legacy as a high school conductor. Please see: *Women's Bands in America...*, p. 130.

<sup>4</sup> She was conductor and also very well known for having founded the Women Band Directors National Association Please see: *Women's Bands in America...*, p. 142.

<sup>5</sup> Please see: *Women's Bands in America...*, p. 170.

<sup>6</sup> She created the Edna White Trumpet Quartette which toured with the vaudeville actress Fern Crassford around the twenties. Please see: *Women's Bands in America...*, p. 79.

guessed how to traverse that labyrinth without scaping. What this means is that they juggled femininity and masculinity to achieve their goals. Regardless if it involved wearing an uncomfortable corset when playing brass instruments (which came as a surprise to some men<sup>7</sup>); or studying very hard to show a great ability to play, as strong as a man<sup>8</sup>; or wearing uncomfortable high heels, or spotless white uniforms and Elisabeth Arden's lipstick while marching for hours for the US Army during the Second World War<sup>9</sup>.

Not only were they in between femininity and masculinity but also in the middle of professional and amateur world. No matter what women thought about bands since they were not considered as capable of playing wood-wind, nor brass instruments and, therefore, not able to be professionals. Bands were not –or hardly never were– a job for women in the nineteenth century. Female bands were sometimes a training place in schools and high-schools, a tool to generate a sense of community in towns around America, or something to make ends meet (with a low wage) as a vaudeville artist.

However, this conception also came from the perspective of an outsider. Critics and audiences broadly believed that women were playing in bands just to pass the time. Even if women's bands were acting like professionals, they were not considered as rigorous musicians or, if so, it was expressed as something striking. For instance, the Audubon Bon Bons (a drum and bugles ensemble) «struggled for many years to be taken seriously in a male-dominated activity»<sup>10</sup>. Unfortunately, their efforts were, in some sense, futile. The reception of their performance did not depend on them, or no the standard of their performance. It was based on the pre-existing social clichés and stereotypes regarding women.

In that sense, the root of the gender problem related to music is, in my view, inside of the ontology of music itself or, better said, in the power given to the music itself<sup>11</sup>. Is the music capable of expressing gender? Is it possible to listen to the gender difference through the sound of a trumpet? Humans can communicate through music. But gendering the sound of the music is taking the issue to its furthest extent. We

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<sup>7</sup> Please see: *Women's Bands in America...*, p. 62.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 40.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 258.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 157.

<sup>11</sup> This idea is glimpsed in Leo Treitler's text. TREITLER, Leo. «Gender and Other dualities of Music History». *Musicology and Difference*. Ruth A. Solie (ed.). Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1993, pp. 23-45, p. 24.

believe than music can express everything we need and we want to. We impose our constructions and ideologies to music (gender, race, social status, etc.). Given the influential role assigned to music, music seems something to be controlled, specially when it comes to women.

What could not and cannot be questioned still today is how strong-willed were those women who wanted things to change. There was a strong determination and commitment underlying lots of the cases exposed in this book<sup>12</sup>. Women had to learn quickly to seize the opportunity they had to work as musicians. An impressive case is the *Ladies of Hell* from the University of Iowa. Women who became bagpipers in just a month thanks to their eagerness and effort. It was necessary to substitute their male colleagues during the Second World War<sup>13</sup>.

Some other women married and juggled marriage, children, and band tours. They had to play a multirole life. The «New

Woman» of the early twentieth century was a Superwoman indeed, who had to fulfill the terms of their gender condition apart from trying to create their own identity. In some cases, they even had to hide; they even had to hide that they had children not to be considered bad mothers for joining the band tours<sup>14</sup>.

Nevertheless, nothing was in vain. These women became role models and inspired other younger women. It was an intergenerational exchange. Moreover, this is still happening nowadays, as the book illustrates: women in rock build their identity through performance or through sound engineering to inspire other women to follow their steps in rock bands<sup>15</sup>.

However, it would not be accurate either fair to state that no men helped these women. The most outstanding example included in this book is the Hormel Girls (which began with a drum and bugle corps and ended with a radio show). This initiative was promoted by George A.

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<sup>12</sup> Some bands worked hand in hand with the early suffragist movements for the vote of women. Please see: *Women's Bands in America...*, p. 140.

<sup>13</sup> Please see: *Women's Bands in America...*, p. 109..

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>15</sup> The idea of women in rock just as singers is obsolete «Simon Frith's *The Sociology of Rock* serves as an example of an analysis of music consumption carried out during the time of our informants' adolescent years. In this work, Frith makes a clear distinction between "girls' and boys' culture" in the 1970s: whereas boys participate in "complex and hi-fi" music, girls have less interest in this form; they play about on guitars but are generally more interested in singing than in instrumental music production. Accordingly, Frith suggests a greater degree of individuality in boys, who actively explore their own creativity. Girls' culture, however, is described as passive, with a remarkable degree of homogeneity». FRITH, Simon. *The Sociology of Rock*. London, Constable & Co., 1978), p. 65. Quoted in PEGLEY, Karen and CAPUTO, Virginia. «Growing up Femal(es). Retrospective Thoughts on Musical Preferences and Meanings». *Queering the Pitch*. New York. Routledge, 2006, pp. 297-315, p. 302

Hormel, who wanted to reward all of the ex-service women who had helped in the Second World War but had been brought back to their home lives as if nothing had happened. This was hard, but it was a sign of the commodification of women bands during the war as a strategy to increase the sales of bonds, as Sullivan points out.

Summing up, this book is both a key to opening new doors for women bands research and an indicator of the lack of thereof. There is too much information unexplored not just in America but also in Europe. There are still thousands of pictures pending in the schools' archives in which there were an all-female band;

hundreds of towns with forgotten female bands; and jazz artists who fell into oblivion despite their contribution. Thus, *Women's Bands in America* is an open-ended text, a to-be-continued-narrative.

«Happiness and unhappiness are habits. You can cultivate whichever habit you choose». This sentence was found by Jill M. Sullivan in Helen Butler's scrapbook, the nineteenth-century band conductor. These words represent the philosophy that drove women to play in bands. If they wanted to blow, to conduct or to march, it was their choice to give it a chance, to be happy or unhappy, despite the unfavorable winds...