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"You should be more cute, you know": Cuteness and Negotiations of Power in Japanese Vocal Jazz

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> As a singer, I want to be more the 'jazz musician type,' not just a 'queen' or 'diva', you know? I feel compelled to act like a leader on stage proclaiming 'hey, I'm a diva'. That's part of my job. But inside, I feel my core is more united with the jazz instruments themselves. (Aoi, personal communication, June, 23, 2020)

Introduction

This quote from an interview with Japanese jazz vocalist Aoi draws our attention to a tension she experiences in her music practice between her 'inside' and 'outside'. Her words point to one of the primary dilemmas facing the female jazz vocalists of this study: that of being positioned as a 'diva' and choosing to be a 'musician'. The feeling she describes of being obligated to perform in line with certain gendered cultural norms and assumptions about female jazz musicianship creates a division between her 'core'—connected to instruments—and her exterior, which is used to mobilize the male gaze during performance. Aoi's story will be our point of entry into the intersection of gender and jazz in a subculture of Japan's flourishing jazz scene, that of commercial jazz performed in bar-type entertainment venues. These venues, called *izakaya* are informal and traditionally masculine spaces where white-collar workers relax after work, consume alcohol and in some cases listen to live music. This study, along with work by Wehr (2016) and Istvandity (2016), carves out a space within the field of gender studies in jazz for an empirically-grounded study of women's experiences. By centering women's own voices and narrative accounts, we bring forth a number of local features from a national context that constitutes the "largest home for jazz outside the US" (Pronko 2018, 271).

Feminist perspectives in jazz research also provide ways of understanding the historical and musicological discourse surrounding the genre and open for the possibility of telling new stories about

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jazz, stories that do not necessarily reproduce myths about jazz as a singularly masculine form of expression. In this study, our focus has been on the social context of music performance, rather than on an analysis of jazz music itself. We attempt to understand musicians' meaning making processes: the ways in which they talk about their music, manage identity-related tensions, and ultimately how musicians make sense of their experiences on and off stage. This article therefore looks at the ways in which gender norms and expectations are experienced by women vocalists in the commercial, primarily urban, jazz scene in Japan.

The questions we ask, and which form the basis for discussion in the analysis sections are as follows: How are women jazz vocalists positioned by the social context surrounding the Japanese jazz milieu? What coping strategies do they use to resist the gendered expectations they are met with? What tensions do they identify with respect to their musicianship? We first provide the background context for this study on women jazz vocalists in Japan and then move into our empirical study centered on women's own stories.

Women in Jazz: Gendered Pathways and Expectations

Women's marginalized status in jazz has traditionally been reinforced by a hierarchy operating within the genre: the valuing of instrumental over vocal jazz as well as 'authentic' over mainstream, commercial forms. First, as Pellegrinelli (2008, 34) notes in her account of the exclusion of vocal forms from jazz history, singing is seen as an important developmental phase but falls off the map in jazz's pursuit of the 'musical sophistication' guaranteed to it by instrumental forms. Singers then, a category dominated by women, get relegated to 'entertainers' on one end of the spectrum with instrumentalists on the other. Women vocalists are doubly marginalized as singers in commercial venues such as the *izakaya* that we will discuss below.

Some of the first empirical studies on women in jazz carried out in western countries have also mapped numerous sites of inequality. Jazz is represented as a difficult milieu for women to both enter *and* sustain themselves throughout their careers. When considered through the lens of gender, a picture emerges of a highly gendered professional milieu where gender has an impact on young women's earliest experiences and remains a significant structuring difference throughout their musical careers. Such inequalities concern gender imbalance in study programs (Devroop 2012) and young women's discomfort in jazz as opposed to classical music ensembles (McKeage 2004). Many obstacles are also institutional, where women have been denied access to musical training or simply cannot see themselves as integral parts of male-dominated education programs, and as a consequence, experience difficulties in establishing professional connections within the genre (McClary 1991). Kanter (1993, 1977) describes the difficulty of working in jazz as a male-dominated environment, particularly due to

the presence of different "role traps" that categorize women into roles that are understandable to men: mother, seductress, pet, and iron maiden are three examples. These four roles reduce women to stereotypes and fail to take into account women's musicianship and professional skills. Wehr (2016, 483) suggests a way forward that involves addressing exclusion earlier, during jazz education: "creating jazz combos by personality, and possibly grouping by gender, could provide a more comfortable environment for learning the jazz language for some, until the students have enough mastery experiences to build their confidence for playing in mixed groups".

McClary (1991) connects the aforementioned inequalities to gendered ideals about artistic creation. One might think that jazz represents a more inclusive milieu than other forms of music given its valuing of creativity, openness, non-conformity, as well as its early connections to marginalized communities of 19th century America. Yet in spite of an apparent openness, the field remains paradoxically connected to ideals of masculine creativity and male artistic genius, leaving women struggling to create spaces where they can flourish. Jazz has a reputation for being an intellectual and creative genre and as "[women] have been assumed to be incapable of sustained creative activity" they seem to be excluded from the onset (McClary 1991, 18).

Research carried out during the past decade has brought into better focus the unique struggles facing women in jazz internationally. In particular, Buscatto (2022), drawing from interviews with jazz musicians all over the world and now available in translation to English-speaking scholars, takes a clear position and presents female jazz musicians as a discriminated minority. Her work, by virtue of its comprehensive mapping of women's experiences, reveals a complex social world of double standards, gendered experiences, and gendered pathways that permeate the professional milieu at all levels. In an analysis of women's stories, she shows how the 'feminine' and 'masculine' come to be associated with particular features that are differently valued. Technique, creation, and virtuosity are primarily associated with instrumentalists (not vocalists, which are predominantly women) and are socially constructed as 'masculine' while vocal jazz—a less 'pure' and devalued form of jazz – comes to be associated with the 'feminine' (Buscatto 2022, 70). The interviews conducted by Buscatto resonate deeply with the first author's interviews with women-identifying jazz musicians in Japan, providing the grounds for numerous echoes and rebounds, and confirming that the status of women in jazz is a global problem. Experiences of sexualization, gender discrimination and systemic devaluing of work remain a central part of women's everyday lives.

Jazz in Japan: Including Women's Experiences in the Knowledge Gap

In recent years, more and more women of Japanese descent have appeared on the covers of jazz magazines with international readership, testifying to an emerging feminine presence in Japanese jazz.

Hiromi Uehara, the renowned jazz pianist was featured on the cover of *DownBeat* magazine on the April 2013 and December 2019 issues. More recently, Miho Hazama, the Grammy nominated composer/arranger was hailed as one of *DownBeat*'s "25 for the Future" (de Barros, 2022). This feminine presence emerging from Japan is interesting in the sense that these women have paved the way in the global scene for both Japanese jazz musicians but also for women jazz musicians in general.

There is a striking number of female jazz musicians from Japan who have, in spite of the obstacles described above, gone on to achieve international fame. The famous jazz pianist Toshiko Akiyoshi, for example, became the first high-level Japanese musician to be inducted into the International Jazz Hall of Fame in 1999. Today it is common for renowned Japanese musicians to divide their professional activities between New York and Tokyo, but Akiyoshi was one of the first performers to do so (Ogawa 2019). Akiyoshi was also the first Japanese musician, man or woman, to study jazz in the United States. There are also others: Sachi Hayasaka, Junko Ōnishi, Satoko Fujii, and particularly Hiromi Uehara form a group of world-famous female bandleader and/or instrumentalists from Japan who have negotiated successful careers in jazz. A 2013 opinion piece in the *Japan Times* even questions why female jazz has been left out of the 'Cool Japan' initiative, Japan's brand strategy that aims to showcase the attractiveness of Japanese culture globally (Smith 2013).

Japan's jazz community has historically had to locate itself in an aesthetic hierarchy that explicitly reinforces asymmetries of power and cultural prestige in the Japan-U.S. relationship by placing American jazz artists as 'innovators', and non-Americans at the bottom as 'imitators' (Atkins 2001, 11). The innovator/imitator dichotomy has been subsequently destabilized with emerging understandings of jazz as a diasporic rather than US-centric form (Johnson 2019). Pronko (2018), looking to the Japanese jazz community, shows how such a hierarchy can be destabilized when one considers how deeply jazz intersects with traditional cultural beliefs in Japan. Jazz's 'humanness', its intersections Zen, as well as foregrounding of "virtuosity, creativity, and authenticity" all intersect meaningfully with Japanese cultural values. Yet such Japanese cultural values are connected to traditions—Zen in particular—that are largely dominated by men or symbolically linked to masculinity. As such they overshadow the role played by gender as a structuring element in Japanese society. The most recent Global Gender Gap Report (Schwab et al 2017) testifies to the continued existence of social expectations that place women in a subordinate position to that of men in contemporary Japan. Steel (2019) acknowledges this reality but claims that it is necessary to understand the distribution of power in specific arenas of Japanese daily life.

Methodological Framework: Gender, Cuteness, and Jazz Performance

As McClary (1991) notes in *Feminine Endings*, "music does not passively reflect society; it also serves as a public forum within which various models of gender organization (along with many other aspects of social life) are asserted, adopted, contested, and negotiated" (McClary 1991, 8). Studying the social context around music therefore provides insight into social history itself, into different constellations of gender organization available at any given moment, whether these are hegemonic or resistant.

The empirical material for this qualitative study consists of eight in-depth interviews, conducted by the first author, with jazz musicians between the ages of 30-50: four vocalists and four instrumentalists. All describe themselves as 'mid-career' and all have completed some form of musical training in Japan or spent several formative years in Japan. A few of the musicians studied music in the U.S. The interviewees were recruited through the snowball sampling method, which opened up to a broader range of participants. At the time of the interviews, the informants were located in Tokyo, different parts of the Kansai area, and a few were based outside of Japan. The interviews were all conducted digitally over the course of two months, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, which made travel very difficult. The analysis is based primarily on the statements of jazz vocalists, since it emerged from the coding process that they constituted a coherent subgroup of informants. All data has been anonymized, and the names provided are pseudonyms.

Before proceeding with analysis, we would like to say a few words about our informants whose accounts illuminated different aspects of gender and jazz performance. *Aoi* told the most deliberate stories, vividly illustrated with many examples from her daily life as a jazz vocalist. Aoi is our main informant. She is well reflected, and we perceived her as very conscious of her own positioning in the musical sphere both in Japan and in the U.S. *Sakura* spoke at length in her interview about the lack of feminism in Japan and explained how women themselves do not recognize the problem. Sakura gave a detailed description of the *izakaya* bars, particularly the singer-hostesses and emphasized throughout the interview that gender inequality runs deep in Japanese society. Through *Nanami's* interview, the first author learned more about the saké-serving *izakaya*, and how women are used as signboards to get men to enter the jazz clubs. *Rin* was the most experienced interviewee. She comes from an interesting background in that she has experience in both commercial venues and with improvisational jazz in less commercial settings. She was eager to use metaphors to describe jazz in a deeply philosophical way. Rin was aware of the prevalent inequality in society, but also accepted to work within the current situation, trusting that it was about to change for the better.

In the analysis that follows, we identify the discursive practices – ways of speaking, naming, and organizing through language—that *do* things in the social world surrounding music production. Central to our analysis is the way in which discourse—in part but never completely—constitutes individual

social subjects. In our data analysis, we highlight discursive repertoires that vocalists draw from to challenge hegemonic ways of talking about jazz. As such, these musicians describe both being positioned by forces outside their control while simultaneously attempting to position themselves as professional musicians and artists through practices that disrupt gender hierarchies. We have tried to place emphasis on several discursive repertoires at work to avoid presenting an oversimplistic account of women's experiences in the jazz hierarchy. As Istvandity (2016, 77) cautions in her ethnographic analysis of gender in the Brisbane jazz scene, stereotypes concerning female vocalists are "all too easily combined into one discourse that characterizes singers as subordinate to instrumentalists". Finally, discourse never wholly constitutes social subjects, and we see evidence of the ways in which, in spite of persistent discursive positionings, women resist, cope and negotiate more livable professional lives.

In a final word of caution, it is important to note that to study different aspects of music and gender in a culturally sensitive and contextualized way is a challenge. It was this challenge that lurked in the background throughout this study, particularly as fieldwork in Japan was made impossible by travel limitations imposed by the pandemic. We did use several strategies in both data collection and analysis that aimed to leave as much space as possible for the musicians' own stories to emerge. One such strategy involved departing from the semi-structured interview guide as informants called our attention to unforeseen dimensions of their experience. We also attempted to make the interviews as dialogical as possible, respecting what Frank (2012) calls the "unfinalized nature of persons". Informants were given room to express tensions and complexity without us actively intervening to summarize or conclude. As Frank reminds us, "People tell stories in order to revise their self-understanding, and any story stands to be revised in subsequent stories" (2012, 5); this revision sometimes occurred within the space of one interview. Finally, it is worth reminding that our analysis gives a situated, partial viewpoint and, although limited, will hopefully open up for future knowledge production in the emerging field of jazz and gender.

Gender

One of the key insights to emerge from the field of gender studies over past decades has been the idea that gender is not 'natural' or a personal feature of individuals. Rather, gender is produced through social interactions and through social institutions that imbue categories like 'man' or 'woman' with meaning (West and Zimmerman 1987). In their pioneering text *Doing Gender*, West and Zimmerman (1987, 129) state that "gender might be exhibited or portrayed through interaction, and thus be seen as 'natural,' while it is being produced as a socially organized achievement". The task of the researcher is to turn to that which appears as 'natural' and deconstruct it. For a consideration of gender and jazz, the idea that gender is produced through interaction is also important because makes us conscious that cultural performances such as music, dance, theater and sports literally provide stages for

representations of what society considers to be masculine and feminine behaviors (West and Zimmerman 1987, 137).

In the wake of West and Zimmerman's work, Judith Butler (1990, 33) talks about gender as 'performative' meaning that no one individual performs gender alone. Gender is always performed for an audience. Gender is not a reflection of an inner female or male core, but it is rather enacted in our everyday life. As Butler (1990, 191) argues, the subject is not free to choose which gender to enact, but is faced with limited possibility for action outside of the "meanings already socially established". When social subjects deviate from gendered expectations, they experience sanctioning as several of our informants report.

Finally, Butler (1990) questions the extent to which we can assume that any given individual can be said to constitute an autonomous 'self', and how performance relies on certain boundaries that makes the performance 'readable to others'. The concept of gender performativity is useful for, not only does it invite an analysis of the different experiences of musicians within the jazz scene in Japan, but it can also reveal the structures and cultures inherent to jazz music that facilitate the production of these gendered norms.

Vocal Jazz and the Importance of Being 'Cute'

An earlier work by Buscatto (2018) on French women in jazz entitled *Feminisations of artistic work: Legal measures and female artists' resources do matter* details how women tend to be overrepresented in so-called 'feminine' styles, genres or instruments, while men tend to be overrepresented in so-called 'masculine' styles, genres or instruments. Vocal jazz, a type of jazz overwhelmingly dominated by women, consistently occupies the lowest position in the hierarchy of jazz instruments and is more often negatively judged by critics. With reference to Connell (1995), Buscatto (2018) explains how instrumental jazz is associated with 'masculine' qualities such as technical mastery, virtuosity, virility or self-assertion, while singing is associated with 'feminine' qualities such as grace, softness, emotion, fragility, with an emphasis on relationships. Ensembles with a female vocalist are considered to be less skilled than purely instrumental ones (Buscatto 2022, 23).

Cuteness is now a globalized phenomenon, yet it has deep roots in Japanese women's culture (Dale 2016; Ngai 2012). Originally an aesthetic popular among adolescent girls or *shōjo*, some of the first *kawaii* images represented idle, upper-class young women with dreamy expressions, large expressive eyes, and defenseless poses, suspended between two phases of life: no longer a child but not yet a woman, *kawaii* objects hover outside of the social order. Dale (2019, 326) points out that "Due to their youth, *shōjo* were detached from both the economy of production and reproduction as they faced no demand to inhabit a productive place in society, which represented an unattainable freedom to adults". Yet in spite of its intrinsic helplessness, Ngai (2012) argues that cuteness is far from being

limited to a process of objectification and opens up for a more complex process of subject and object interaction. Arguing for an 'internal instability' of cuteness, she shows how the subject's fantasies directed towards cute objects can give cute the upper hand, endowing the cute object with an aesthetic power over its consumer.

In order to better understand the context surrounding vocal jazz in Japan, which is primarily performed by women, it is important to make explicit the connections between femininity and 'cuteness' in a Japanese cultural context. Much like Aoi at the beginning of this text, the other vocalists of this study repeatedly claim that being or acting more 'cute' has the potential to improve their popularity among the predominantly male audience. This has to do with the fact that being 'cute' or *kawaii* as it is known in Japanese brings with it a whole sociocultural network (Yano 2013, 55). It is important to point out that the complexity of *kawaii* is only partially captured by its English translation and contains "an added layer of vulnerability derived from its etymological link with *kawaisō* (pitiable, pathetic)" (Yano 2013, 56). This vulnerability of the object is extended as a plea to the viewer, eliciting the desire for adult care (57). We carry forward into our analysis Yano's claim that although the link between the cute and the vulnerable originate in the mother-child relationship, we see its manifestation in other societal arenas (56). We consider 'cuteness' to be an important repertoire used by jazz vocalists to explain socially acceptable ways of behaving on stage and toward their audience post-performance.

Izakaya and the Japanese Commercial Jazz Scene

In spite of recent literature that recognizes jazz as an essentially diasporic art form, created through its extensive migration across the globe, there is still very little known about jazz's local development in Japan, including how it is performed in various (and less prestigious) subcultures. The subculture that came into focus rather unexpectedly throughout the interviews was that of the *izakaya* performing venue with its gendered performance expectations. Such establishments, as popular sites for male camaraderie and drinking are primarily masculine spaces where white-collar workers can wind-down after work. Although women have an increasing presence in the workforce, it is men who primarily frequent such establishments. In such bar venues female jazz vocalists perform for primarily entertainment purposes, are often used to lure male clientele into the club. The expectation is that female vocalists adopt a subservient hybrid singer-hostess role to please and seduce clients.

The Ambiguity of Being 'Cute'

In this section, we analyze the different subject positions women vocalists occupy within the nightclub atmosphere of the *izakaya* bars. Such performance venues create a situation where jazz vocalists struggle to liberate themselves from gendered expectations that govern music performance. The jazz vocalists interviewed in this study described different coping strategies they developed to manage such

outside pressures. The questions addressed in this section are as follows: How do jazz vocalists position themselves within established and highly gendered musical discourses related to performance? What options are available, and what do their choices signify within a broader cultural framework?

None of the vocalists who participated in this study recall having a linear career trajectory that led them purposefully to jazz but rather, describe the chance encounters, most often with female role models or teachers that led to its discovery. Sakura, for example, did not receive formal training and her love of singing led her to perform in clubs in New York. Upon returning to Japan, she had a female teacher who challenged her and pushed her toward improvisation. Sakura reflects on the ways in which jazz vocal education in Japan remains underdeveloped because it is considered to be a woman's job and that "most Japanese musicians don't recognize the problem". She identifies vocal jazz as a 'special' arena with its own set of challenges for women. Part of the problem according to Sakura is with the venues themselves: "Some bars [*izakaya*] have a piano and singers. They play jazz, and singers do the hostess thing [serve drinks, converse and dote on male clients] and sing. Real musicians don't do those kinds of things, the singers are really special in this way". Serving and performing are conflated, and the vocalist acts as both bartender and singer, often provocatively dressed to please the businessmen. The vocalist's job, according to Sakura, is to serve and satisfy them through her presence.

Nanami is a jazz vocalist with broad experience from different kinds of venues. She describes how women are often used for publicity purposes to lure men to jazz clubs: "The bars or drinking places need women as a signboard. Women are more used in commercial things". The deployment of young women to serve as barkers in the context of Japanese nightlife has according to Miller (2011) a long history.

Additionally, in order to sing on stage, women are expected to look a particular way. The vocalists are marketable with their looks and youth, but also with their way of interacting with the audience to create a certain atmosphere. Jazz vocalists must remain quintessentially feminine and compliant in the face of male audience. According to Nanami, mood-making is important, and the *izakaya* attract people because of the special mood created at the bars. Clients aren't necessary there for the music:

> We can have fun playing music at those places even though the male clients are not prepared to listen to the music; they just come to drink, talk and have fun. They don't have in mind that we are here to play music. But after we start playing, we can get those people interested in music, we can sometimes switch their interest in music... Not only because of the other special things that we have to do, not like that. It's more of a communication thing – the kind of contact we can create. *Izakayas* don't have the same atmosphere as jazz clubs, they are sometimes more popular or hotter places compared to jazz clubs. Mood-making is very important and sometimes we as musicians become mood-makers (Nanami)

The *izakaya* bars are according to Nanami more popular venues than the jazz clubs and she argues that they have the power to mobilize the clients' attention, and that this mobilizing has a distinct connection to the overall mood of a given bar. She sees her job at the *izakaya* as imbued with a certain level of agency, an outreach project that goes beyond the sometimes slightly inappropriate "other special things" the vocalists are asked to do. Nanami seems to suggest that *izakayas* can be more popular than jazz clubs when they succeed in creating the right kind of mood.

There are clear obstacles associated with performance in *izakaya* venues, notably the expectation that the jazz singer, who is almost always a woman, never appear more knowledgeable than members of the audience. This applies to the music itself but also extends to using native-like English. In the jazz milieu, there is a power in knowing and being able to imitate the influential role models in jazz from the past, particularly American vocalists. However, the relationship between the audience and the vocalist becomes more precarious when the performer shows herself to be more fluent in English than the listener. Sakura reports being told by a spectator: "I can't understand English, so you don't have to sing in that really native way". She relates that it is important that jazz singers in such venues appear unthreatening and harmless vis-à-vis the male audience. When male vocalists sing with native-like proficiency, this may be interpreted as a mark of authenticity while this is not the case for female vocalists who get tied up in a double standard.

Doing Gender, Doing *Burikko*

The relation between the jazz singer and audience in *izakaya* is characterized first and foremost by an unequal power distribution. At first sight the power relation appears unequal with the male consumer as micromanager:

> They want to support female young, musicians or singers, connect… really, they just want to be a little bit above us. To pay to get into the jazz clubs means supporting, and like "I want to support you but at the same time I want to give you more information of what I know about jazz". They want to advise in particular the younger generation of women. (Aoi)

Ultimately, in such *izakaya* venues, the musicians are financially dependent on the audience. However, with their support comes the expectation that the musicians will take advice from them. The jazz vocalists who have a bigger following at jazz clubs try to please their crowd by acting humble. By conforming to conventional gender norms and reinforcing a non-threatening image of girlhood, the vocalists are consciously and unconsciously drawing on linguistic and nonverbal repertoires to fit in so that they avoid sanctioning processes. They use gestures related to cuteness as a coping strategy, using the cute repertoire to secure more popularity. Cuteness is a hot commodity in Japan, and if she wants

to be more famous, Aoi recognizes that she not only has to be good looking and in good shape, but she also has to change the way she talks and acts:

> When I look at others who have more fans or generate larger crowds at the jazz club, I notice specific ways of acting: (towards men) "Thank you so much for coming, thank you so much for advising me" [imitating high-pitched voice], you know, being cute. And acting 'female', like "I'm still learning, thank you so much" even when they are over 30! The more they do it, the more the old men come – to support. I tried it, but I just recently gave up. I can't do that. (Aoi)

The vocalists described by Aoi, well advanced into adulthood, nonetheless adopt a childish submissiveness might be classified as *burikko* behavior. While *kawaii* is generally considered to have unproblematic appeal, *burikko* represents a sort of cuteness gone awry. A high-pitched voice is frequently considered a stereotypical feature of the *burikko*, which according to Miller (2004) is a derogatory label used to describe women who exhibit feigned naivety. Women are taught that innocence, femininity, childishness, and cuteness are desired commodities, and if such a display is ill-matched to one's age or status, the behavior will be judged as *burikko* (Miller, 2004). Through Aoi's description, we see that while cuteness is an approved aspect of feminine display, it is sanctioned within certain age limits. The cute has its boundaries, which include a limited range in which it can be performed. The moment a singer's display is considered inappropriate for her age she is dismissed as *burikko*. Miller argues that "the same display of cuteness, childishness, or femininity can be seen as real or fake, depending on who the actor is and who is doing the evaluation" (Miller 2004, 151). Contemporary young people react negatively to extreme forms of docility and cuteness, while older Japanese men may still admire and endorse the subservient pose of those who perform *burikko* (Miller 2004). Aoi varies the pitch of her voice, inflecting it with a touch of sarcasm, when imitating such a vocalist. She explains how the singers who behave like this (*burikko*) have bigger crowds, consisting essentially of old men. The singer performs perfectly to appeal to the middle-aged men and it "is not unusual for the diva to perform stilted versions of femininity, as if completely capitulating to enforced gender norms" (Miller and Copeland 2018, 10). While the audience at the *izakaya* seems to like it, Aoi finds it really annoying and constrictive.

Because they draw from the same gendered cultural system, many of the features that typify *burikko* performance are also a part of acceptable female gender presentation. The intense appeal of cuteness can produce a sense that the subject is under the cute object's control, which might explain why the vocalists who perform *burikko* have a bigger audience at the jazz venues.

Jazz Singer or Musician?

One of the most striking elements to emerge out of conversations with vocalists was the gap between how they talk about themselves as musicians and what is required of them in many performance contexts. The requirements of the *izakaya*-type venues as they are described by Aoi and Nanami are at odds with the ways in which Rin describes her own professional values and musicianship. Throughout the interview, she places the most value on 'listening'. Rin explains how she nearly enters into a love relationship with music. The connection she builds with her fellow musicians is a central aspect of a successful musical moment:

> The most important thing is listening. Like in love, you know? If I want to become a good musician, if I want the music to love me, first I have to love music. I listen to *great* music. So developing a good ear and learning to be a good listener are the most important things. And when we do improvisation, listening is such an important thing. I might be technically strong, but without listening, I can't connect.
>
> To play beautiful jazz, we need to create a relationship, we need conversation, we need to listen to the same music, talk about idols, listen to each other. This can happen when we go on tour when we eat and drink together. We talk a lot and play a lot, so our relationship becomes stronger. (Rin)

For Rin, listening and other relational processes are valued more highly than musical 'technique'. She describes how important it is to connect with her colleagues and cultivate relationships in the music but also outside. By connecting on a more deeply personal level, she implies that musical accomplishment reflects this connection. In this study, the identities of jazz vocalists are negotiated through a process that is heavily influenced by the audience, composed primarily of male societal elites. Rarely do they have the opportunity to perform in ways that fall in line with the values of connection and relationship-building mentioned by Rin. As such, the commercial venues don't provide an arena for musical development.

During interviews with vocalists, similarities arose in the ways they describe the specific expectations placed on them as jazz singers. They share stories of uncomfortable inquiries and unwanted attention from male spectators at high-end jazz clubs in which they are clearly expected to behave and perform in particular 'feminine' ways. As such, the figure of the 'jazz singer' in commercial spaces in Japan is produced, critiqued and imagined primarily by male elites who are positioned as having expertise over less knowledgeable performers. The vocalists tend to find themselves locked in myths that prevent them from being considered as 'real' musicians and legitimate colleagues.

When asked if there is a difference between being an instrumentalist and singer, Rin explains:

> I really don't want it to be so, but maybe it is a little bit different. I just turned 49, no, but in my youth, I had a bad experience with an audience member coming up to me and saying: "You should be more cute, you know". Some even said more harsh and dirty words to me, but it's still like that for singers.

Rin has experienced how cuteness is unstable and shifts in her meeting with audience. In some cases, the audience wants her to talk with them and Rin is expected to act cute, instigating caretaking behavior and eliciting empathic responsiveness. Miller (2011) explains how women are free to be cute, feminine and fun; they are not as free to disrupt middle-aged fantasies about cooperative, docile girls. The prosocial behavior includes communication and companionship, and Rin expresses that she thinks talking with the audience is fun but sometimes "strange talk occurs", and men take pictures of her during performance. She further underlines how men are stronger in society, and it is more common for men than women to take photos of her performing. Rin offers 'idol culture' in Japan as a reason why men are so eager to photograph her.

Idol singers are a particular type of popular music singer/performer in Japan characterized by youth, beauty and charisma. The idol's image is carefully managed and marketed by agencies that generate the idol's devoted fan base. The counterpart to the idol is the *idol otaku* which refers to a person, often older man, with a nerdy, obsessive devotion to young female idols (Black 2012). She also explains that the vocalists are more exposed to sexualization and harassment from the audience, as they are often placed at the front of the stage communicating directly with the audience. Rin expresses how she miss playing jazz with women colleges, and she just recently realized how tough it has been to be a woman in a male dominated genre. Black (2012, 219) suggests that a female idol "evokes youthful innocence, vulnerability and meekness, and a lack of remoteness or self-sufficiency". This lack of remoteness or orchestrated proximity is indeed one of the main features of idol culture (Galbraith and Karlin 2012). Like the *izakaya* jazz singer, the objective of the idol is driven by consumerism. The more fans the better.

Unlike instrumentalists who mainly focus their attention on the musical act, jazz singers in the *izakaya* context consider that they need to physically please the public and reduce the distance between them and the audience. Attentive servers anticipating the needs of the clientele, ensuring they don't show themselves to be more knowledgeable than the audience, the jazz vocalists role overlaps with that of the idol singer. For this reason, they can never just have one job—that of 'musician'—they are instead expected to perform, please and maintain a careful, cute, and available appearance.

Aoi's words from the epigraph reveal that she inhabits a conflicting subject position where she on the one hand tries to be 'true' to herself in unity with the jazz instruments while on the other hand needs to act like a diva on the stage, because a "certain theatricality is expected, it is one of the diva's duties" (Miller and Copeland 2018, 10). Such performance pressures pull her in opposing directions,

distancing her from her integrity as a musician. This feeling is conveyed as maintaining a sense of connection to her 'core'. She is therefore faced with limited possibility for action outside of the highly rigid, and already socially established 'jazz singer' role. Aoi further explains how she is more interested in non-lyrical improvisation and identifies more as a 'jazz musician' rather than a 'singer'. She expresses a wish to expand the scope for jazz vocalists and make room for more experimental vocals. Aoi does not fit in the 'diva-style', and she says that it requires a lot of additional effort for her to act the part. However, in a room full of jazz instrumentalists – a safe space with likeminded musicians Aoi has the experience of being humiliated or being the object of jokes:

> I used to have a band, and the pianist and bassist were Japanese, but the guitarist and drummer were American. When I gave them a rhythm or feeling before the song started the drummer always made jokes about my count in - because he is a drummer. He is such a nice guy, and I totally understood, but I was very ashamed because I wanted to be at the same level as them, my favorite musicians that I had gathered into a band. And it was *my* band. I was the leader, but they were well-educated, well-experienced, and… I'm just a singer, but I wanted to make my music with the top musicians. In rehearsals I couldn't give them the best indication of the rhythm and the American drummer always made jokes like "Yeah, Aoi, the rhythm wasn't clear" and "that was cute". (Aoi)

Here, Aoi is questioned on her abilities as a band leader, and she becomes the target of the male drummer's jokes. As a result of the joke, the band rehearsal—a band led by Aoi—is transformed into an environment where she is afraid of making mistakes. Even though she feels the drummer is a nice guy, his joke, which undermines Aoi's skills leaves her embarrassed and ashamed. This account also exemplifies the ambiguity of cute, in this case it serves as a derogatory adjective to describe—albeit in a humorous guise—a momentary lack of precision or skill. The drummer's joke reveals how easily it can be associated with women's musicianship where 'cute' is used to describe a lack of technical savoir-faire. The set of relations within the band shows that this form of cute, associated with incompetence, is incompatible with good musicianship. The quote also shows how Aoi, as a vocalist, minimizes her own skills and contrasts them with those of her "well-experienced" and "well-educated" colleagues as she refers to herself as "just a singer". This aligns with Buscatto's finding that singers tend to be judged as illegitimate leaders. They are often assumed to have a lack of musical knowledge and a lesser ability to create their own music (Buscatto, 2022, 27). Finally, serving as bandleader doesn't insulate Aoi from the effects of humor that undermine her skills nor does the position of bandleader afford her a higher level of prestige within the group.

More 'Womanly' on Stage?

Throughout the interviews, Aoi continuously refers to 'jazz singer' in air quotes in an effort to show her critical stance toward this socially-defined role. The air quotes acknowledge that the jazz singer role does not purely belong to jazz but overlaps with the idol singer and diva. Taking up this role does not only involve gendered stage behavior but also physical appearance:

> I'm a woman, I'm a 'jazz singer' and I try to be as good looking as a business person […] I try to be more 'woman' on the stage in terms of how I respond and what clothes and makeup I wear. Because the audience who pays are… men. Businessmen. In my mind I have to be the woman on the stage who performs for payment. (Aoi)

Aoi explains that she changes her behavior, acts more feminine and wears certain clothes and makeup because she knows that the audience is primarily male and has expressly come to see a woman on stage. They are not specifically there for the jazz. But Aoi is business oriented: she knows that the businessmen pay a lot of money to get into jazz clubs to see her, and therefore she feels obligated to enhance her femininity on stage. Seduction appears to be located at the heart of the jazz singer's activity vis-à-vis the public. The body of the singer is first of all a body to be looked at during stage performance and not the site of the musician's 'core'. In this sense, vocal jazz is an arena where opposing ideals concerning musicianship are played out. Aoi wants to be successful, but she also wants to stay true to her own musicianship. However, to become successful she must act "more womanly on stage".

While making money is *a* goal for the jazz singers, it is not *the* goal. Aoi wants to succeed, but not at the expense of "keeping it real". She further suggests that male spectators prefer to be entertained by a vocalist's appearance and the illusions they create rather than by a proximity to the singer as an individual person with a life outside the jazz club. Aoi explains that businessmen pay a lot of money to go to the jazz clubs and expect to be entertained by singers who keep their family life a secret. The jazz diva "reminds us – with her brilliance – just how very dull we are. We can take comfort in our dullness, knowing the diva is there to stockpile our desires, our subversive dreams, our secrets" (Miller and Copeland 2018, 11). The female idealizations of the jazz singer are not associated with working lives, families, education or other markers of everyday life. However, Aoi is completely honest about her family life, unlike many other jazz vocalists, and she understands that this has consequences.

> I'm open to saying I am married, I have kids. But here in Japan it was a little bit – not prohibited, but it was not common to be honest about our lifestyle or family or whatever to our audience or fans. *Especially* for jazz, it is not really easy to go to jazz clubs because it is not cheap. Lots of businessmen bring friends or coworkers and it is not cheap at all. […] So I have to be… the woman on the stage that they pay in

> exchange for entertainment. But at the same time, I'm not young anymore. I had so many of those fans when I was young, but now I am over 40 and they know my husband or kids, you know? No more secrets for me. So now I have a core group of jazz amateurs who come regularly, but it is very limited. If I want to be more famous, I would have to be more good looking, in better shape. I would have to pay more attention to my appearance. (Aoi)

'Jazz singers' are seen as expensive entertainment for businessmen, whose money secures them a privileged space in the audience. For the female jazz vocalist, choices aligned with feminine behavior may appear as more 'rational' and 'logical' on stage because they are associated with higher levels of success and popularity. One vocalist estimates that her fans who are into 'real music' compose only 10% of her listeners while 90% are simply there to consume and enjoy the spectacle, a prominent part of which are the power relations staged between performer and spectator. Jazz vocalists are therefore forced into a rather narrow, rigid role, and non-conformity would mean being left with the remaining 10% of actual jazz listeners. As a dedicated performer, some jazz singers choose to conform to ideals of beauty to make themselves more appealing, which is justified as a conscious and savvy career decision.

Trapped in the Cuteness Paradox

Ideals concerning 'proper' female behavior in jazz venues place women vocalists in a paradox. The singers are denigrated for being too seductive for their age (*burikko*) when performing according to expectations that guarantee them a satisfactory level of audience approval. Aoi sees these phenomena as existing outside of Japan as well:

> I think Japan stands out, but in the U.S. vocalists also try to have a very sexy demeanor. Yeah, they use it, and they know how to get more people to listen. I think it is the same everywhere. But here in Japan there is a *hostess culture*, that is also a part of it, but it is kind of old style. Men get jealous. They are all jealous: "wow, female, young and good looking, so good looking. They have lots of fans, but what about us?" Men could never use their looks so easily to generate fans, and they [the women] know it – how to control people. But men, they can't do as much as a woman. They always wear just suits or you know, shirt and tie – that's it. We have more freedom in displaying or revealing things, our bodies, so they are jealous. (Aoi)

The bodily attention solicited by certain singers provokes jealousy from jazz musicians who do not have a body that corresponds to cultural ideals concerning the female body.

Aoi explains how the female singers can manipulate power by being able to use their bodies to attract. These female 'jazz singers' know, according to Aoi, how to control people. The singers are fully aware of how to use their looks to attract a larger audience, and what one might see as submission or loss of control, paradoxically, is transformed into a strategy. The quote shows that there exists a power

in submission, and a power in the female jazz singer's body in the *izakaya*. Cuteness ultimately provides an interpretative repertoire that both restricts and provides a resource. Aoi, in particular, uses 'cuteness' to reveal how social interactions as flexible resources are able to construct different versions of reality. Through what Yano (2013, 83) refers to as the "disarming quality of kawaii", cuteness as a repertoire is used to gain control. Given the powerful affective demands that the cute object makes on us, one could argue that this paradoxical doubleness is embedded in the concept of cute from the start. The performer uses her cuteness strategically for her own professional and economic advancement.

Cuteness is a fundamentally commercial aesthetic, and as conversations with women vocalists show, it is tied up in a number of gendered expectations that are far from straightforward. Cuteness is not widely discussed as an attribute of 'serious' jazz instrumentalists. In this study, women vocalists, marginalized by their less prestigious status as 'just singers' in the words of Aoi, negotiate cuteness at the intersection of ways of consuming music that come from outside of jazz: those connected to the figures of the idol singer, the diva, and the hostess. Theorized more as a relationship than an attribute, the instability and ubiquity of cuteness in Japanese popular culture allows its consumers to draw from less innocent variants. This was the case when women vocalists like Aoi recounted being on the receiving end of unwanted advances. Cuteness's connections to other commercial musical forms also places women vocalists into a double bind: use it as a coping strategy to create a more livable professional existence—gaining more clients and potentially earning more money—or refuse to engage and accept the sanctions. The women we interviewed clearly experienced music performance in *izakaya* venues as pulling them away from their 'real' musicianship in jazz. The relationality that Rin describes, for example, is based in attentive listening to the other, reciprocity and discussion. Cuteness imposed on vocalists in the context of the *izakaya* performance venue – itself a masculine space – required vocalists to feign a knowledge deficit vis-à-vis the male audience and sustain illusions grounded in ideals of femininity.

In line with the scholars of *kawaii* mentioned above, our study confirms that rather than being purely an aesthetic of childhood or 'feminine spectacle', cuteness can emerge in disruptive and unruly ways when it intersects with highly gendered social scripts, such as the role of a 'jazz singer'. As Miller and Copeland (2018, 5) argue, "Divas push the boundaries of expression, asking us to question what is natural, what is culturally appropriate [..]. And even when she presents herself as upholding gendered norms, her performance of femininity is so obvious, so exaggerated, she calls into question the very nature of those norms", like the jazz singers described by Aoi who attract a bigger crowd.

The repertoire afforded by cuteness in its various forms allows us to see how coping strategies evolve to deal with the unequal power and narrow expectations facing women vocal performers. The role of the singer in commercial jazz venues locks them in an undervalued position not regarded as

'professional'. Our informants' stories open new perspectives on the 'jazz singer' in one particular, economically significant subculture of jazz in Japan contributing both to knowledge about women in jazz but also about the gendered negotiations that happen in these highly popular jazz venues. Cuteness is adopted as a subject position that engages the male gaze, namely the white-collar audience of the *izakaya*. The cuteness appeal still exerts great power in popular jazz venues and the better women are able to play the part, the more popular they become among the audience. The findings of this study suggest that even though the performance of *burikko* and highly feminized cuteness is not shared by all women, it is to some degree practiced by most women vocalists in order to cope with societal expectations governing jazz music performance. To a certain degree, jazz vocalists do play on gendered notions of 'cute' to further their own economic interests and in that way, cuteness provides a coping strategy to help gain popularity. In the context of female jazz vocalists, performing cuteness, from vulnerability to more seductive behaviors was perceived as objectifying, but women also felt they could somehow negotiate cuteness and albeit to a lesser extent use its instability to their advantage. Cuteness provides a counter strategy for holding power over an audience, but it doesn't advance women vocalists' aims to move up in the jazz hierarchy. Although *kawaii* has generated a number of tentacles like idol singing and diva culture, these different discursive repertoires ultimately remain limited because of jazz's devaluing of mainstream, commercial performance.

Future Research on Gender and Jazz in Japan

The current study contributes new knowledge to the field of gender studies in jazz, but it has clear limitations. Future research in this field may benefit from examining the life stories and experiences of the highly successful Japanese instrumentalists and bandleaders—four out of five of whom are pianists – to understand more about their pathways to success. Part of the pathway that might be included is the role of education (domestic or abroad) and choice of instrument. Although this study gives voice to women jazz vocalists' experiences of performing in a certain type of venue, it did not investigate the singers' repertoires. It would be interesting in a future study to examine what women vocalists coming from different traditional of popular music (idol singing, hip-hop and jazz) have in common and what sets them apart.

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