

Much More Than the Notes

Episode 1: Val Wilmer

Valerie Wilmer (Yorkshire, 1941) is an English writer, photographer, and historian specializing in jazz, blues, gospel, and British African-Caribbean music and culture. Wilmer's career as a journalist began in the late 1950s. Since then, she has interviewed and written about countless artists.

Wilmer is the author of knowledgeable and respectful books on jazz and black music: *Jazz People* (1970), *The Face of Black Music* (1976), *As Serious as Your Life: The Story of The New Jazz* (1977), and her autobiography *Mama Said There'd Be Days Like This: My Life in the Jazz World* (1989). She has contributed to several publications, including *Melody Maker*, *Jazz Journal*, *Down Beat*, *The Wire*, and *The Guardian*.

Her photographs are part of the collections of institutions like the National Portrait Gallery (London), the Musée d'Art Moderne (Paris), the Victoria and Albert Museum (London), the Smithsonian Museum (Washington D.C.), the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture (New York) and the Bishopsgate Institute (London).



Self-portrait by Val Wilmer. Courtesy of The Streatham Society

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Transcript:

[Audio: Art Ensemble of Chicago. "Theme De Yoyo" from *Les Stances À Sophie*. Universal Sound (1970/2000)]

[Audio: Art Ensemble of Chicago. "Kabalaba Speaks" from *Kabalaba: Live At Montreux Jazz Festival*. AECO Records (1978/1997)]

Val Wilmer: I can't remember when it was now, what year it was, but nearly 70s. I went to a concert in Paris, I think it was at the [Théâtre du] Vieux-Colombier, I think I'm not quite sure, with the Art Ensemble of Chicago. It was a wonderful concert and Fontella Bass was still with the Art Ensemble and she came out and sang and the atmosphere was electric and there was a great shout from the back of the hall, and I realized there was a whole crowd of African American people there. And at the end of the concert everybody was applauding and the people from the back came forward to go up to the stage and remember them going up on the stage and everybody was embracing everybody else.

And that was such an extraordinary moment because people write about jazz and they don't know... They just talk about the notes and the music and don't talk about the personal things and the social, economic, historical background... Well, it was impossible to ignore it on this occasion because this was very much an example of people away from home, because they were all in Paris, and they were hearing something of their own and, for the musicians, they were receiving the acclaim of their own people, of their homeboys and homegirls. I stood there... I just looked at this all going on and I realised that I'd always wanted to be part of that world, but at that moment I knew that I was definitely from another world, another culture, which was alright, just the realization... Because if you have that thing of wanting to be part of someone else's world... I didn't ever have that feeling and told me not... not to be. I would still be close to people and have friendships, but there were moments that weren't for me.

Much More Than the Notes. Music, its Poetics and its Politics. Episode 1: Val Wilmer

VW: My name is Val Wilmer. I'm an English journalist, photographer, and historian, and most of my work has dealt with jazz, improvised music, blues, aspects of black music and, latterly, aspects of black history, particularly pertaining to life in Britain.

[Audio: New Orleans Wanderers. "Perdido Street Blues" from *Johnny Dodds*. Classics (1926/1991)]

Val Wilmer is a familiar name to jazz lovers due to her iconic photographs and books dedicated to black music and culture. Born in 1941 in Harrogate, Yorkshire, but raised in South London, she has been an avid jazz enthusiast since childhood. In 1956, she took her first photograph, a portrait of Louis Armstrong. Early on, Wilmer pioneered a socioeconomic approach to music journalism, always connecting the music to the context it emerges from. She is the author of respectful and knowledgeable works on jazz, soul, and blues. In 1970, she published her first book, *Jazz People*, a notable collection of profiles of today's legendary names like Thelonius Monk, Cecil Taylor, and Archie Shepp. But her most revered title is *As Serious As Your Life*, a book published in 1977 that chronicles her first-hand experience of the Free Jazz movement in the United States when it was in full swing. The project was born when Wilmer stumbled upon a

deceivingly titled book, *The New Music*. It was devoted to figures like John Cage and Karlheinz Stockhausen but ignored the cutting-edge contemporaries like the ones she had met during her trips to New York in the sixties: Ornette Coleman, Albert Ayler, Sun Ra, or Marion Brown, to name a few. Her 1989 autobiography, *Mama Said There'd Be Days Like This*, does not well-known, should also be considered required reading. Penned when she was only 48, because she was far beyond the typical memoir of the music journalist, gathering recollections on several inspiring matters: her life-changing learning from the migrant communities living in a country still hostile to foreigners, her coming out as a lesbian, her involvement in the women's movement, and her role in launching *Format*, one of the first all-women's photographic agencies. Nowadays, Wilmer continues writing and researching about black history in Britain.

This interview took place on 22 June 2023 at Wilmer's home in Hackney, London.

VW: My father died when I was very young and my mother took in people to live in our house, lodgers, who lived with us. We call them in England, "paying guests" because they eat meals with us and so on.

So, we had a constant turnover of people in the house and one of them was a young man called Michael and he was a student with a college scarf and everything, and he liked jazz. I didn't know what jazz was, I wasn't particularly interested in music, and he used to show off to one of the other lodgers, who was a girl... And he brought home the *Melody Maker*, which was the music paper that everybody in the business read, and in show business and in music business and jazz fans... It was "the" paper. So, I started to read the *Melody Maker* and I got to know it. And then I met a boy. I was about eleven or twelve at the time, I guess twelve... He was a little bit older than me, and he told me about Louis Armstrong and Humphrey Lyttelton, who was one of our local heroes, who played the trumpet as well. And so I began to realise that jazz was something, but I don't know if... what I'd heard of it yet, you know, if I have actually heard it played. And one day I realised there was a shop near where I lived where they sold records. So I went in there and this man looked up for me and said: "What's this girl want?". Something ridiculous. And I said: "Have you got any jazz records?". So he said: "Oh well, yes, one or two" and waved me over. They had second hand seventy-eight records; you know the old ten-inch shellac records. And I found a record by Humphrey Lyttelton and I thought: "I know this name", and I rushed home with it and played it and of course that was it. I was in.

[Audio: Humphrey Lyttelton & His Band. "Fidgety Feet, Parlophone" from *Fidgety Feet/March Hare*. Parlophone (1952)]

I was very lucky that shop was there because I went back again and again, and he used to give me records that have been cracked. You know they were either cracked or chipped in the post. So, I discovered Charlie Parker and all sorts of people that I wasn't supposed to like because they were modern. You know modernists. And what I always say... People say to me: "How did you find out about jazz?". But I always say: "Jazz discovered me". And, of course, if somebody discovers you, well you've got to live up to what it is.

[Audio: Duke Ellington. "Someone" from *Never No Lament: The Blanton-Webster Band*. Bluebird (1942/2003)]

The thing that people today don't understand is that jazz was actually quite fashionable at that time. You know this is we're talking about the 1950s. I was born in 1941, so we're talking about 1953, traces somehow 54. And young people went to hear jazz, mostly sort of revivalist jazz, copying the New Orleans players and so on. But there was also a great thirst for the authenticity of American music on all sides, because of course we'd got rock and roll coming along at the same time, but at the same time England, or should I say Britain, we hadn't been able to have Americans playing because of a ban that existed between The Musicians' Union and the American Federation of Musicians, which went back to 1934. So, no American bands had played in England until 1956. Musicians like Ellington could only play in this country following the ban of 1934 by being classified as "variety artists". If they came over as members of The Musicians' Union, they couldn't play here. Some people did, Sidney Bechet is the classic example, but that broke the law and the people who promoted the concert, they were fined for it. They had to go to court, and it seems ridiculous now when you look back on it. And of course, in France and Germany — but in France particularly —, Americans were coming and going, just like a natural way of life.

And after years of negotiations and, incidentally, the popularity of rock and roll, the unions [Musicians' Union and the American Federation of Musicians] came to a decision that if a British musician played in the States, an American musician could play here. It was an exchange one for one.

[Audio: Louis Armstrong & The All Stars. "My Bucket's Got A Hole In It" from Complete Newport 1956 & 1958. Mosaic (1956/2014)]



I went to see Louis Armstrong in 1956, he came over with his All Stars. I don't remember very much about the concert, I went with my mother and my brother, who was a little boy then really. And I read in the *Melody Maker* that he was leaving London on a certain day which coincided with a holiday from school. So, I said to my mother: "Can we go to the airport?", we'd been to the airport a few times just to look at the planes. This time we went to look at the *King of Jazz* [Louis Armstrong] and we saw him with Humphrey Lyttelton, who is quite a figure in my life really, and I went up to him and got his autograph and then I said: "Can I take you a photograph?".

And I took my first picture of a musician with my mother's old box camera where you wind on the film big, big size, large size negatives. I think that coming face to face with the ultimate hero in jazz must have had a tremendous effect on me.

Val Wilmer, *Louis Armstrong during concert at BBC TV Theatre, London, June 1965, 1965.*
© Val Wilmer / Victoria and Albert Museum, London

[Audio: Duke Ellington, Charles Mingus and Max Roach. "Money Jungle" from *Money Jungle*. Blue Note (1962/2016)]

Black Music

It's too simplistic to say that black music is the music of the 20th century or 21st century, but it still is, because it colors everything. But I think it's also very important, I mean, when I was younger, I always thought that black music transcends everything. And, of course, it doesn't. There is other music in the world too. There's room for everything. And jazz — I would never have said it years ago — has many elements of European music in it. The main thing to always remember is the creativity. The main, the thrust of it all comes from African America, the music of the enslaved people, which started in the cotton fields or the tobacco fields or wherever it was, and in the Caribbean, it started in the cane fields and work songs... They're all part of what we hear today. If we hear Albert Ayler, or if we hear Peter Brötzmann, for that matter, we're hearing something that comes from those work songs and sanctified shouts in the church and so on. That's where it comes from. It has a lot of Europe in it as well, but... Well, Quincy Jones summed it up, and when he said that: "Jazz is so strong", he said: "it would eat anything it came next to". And I personally believe that; it's a very powerful music. Also, another statement made by Max Roach, the drummer. He said: "Jazz is the music of true democracy. It enables you to, if you're 16, it enables you to be 16 and if you're 60, enables you to sound like you're 60". It's not an exact quote, but I think it's a very poignant one and it shows you that jazz is available for everybody to listen to and to be part of and to learn from.

Because for me jazz has been an education, and as we discussed earlier, it's been a way of self-discovery. I admired these people Bechet, Armstrong, King Oliver, Jelly Roll Morton, all those early people. I admired them so much that I went to the library and borrowed a book called *Shining Trumpets* and tore out all the photographs and stuck them in my scrapbook and stole them. I can admit it now, but they were my heroes and I'm sure that anybody at school, especially the teachers, if they had opened my scrapbook they'd think: "What on earth has she got all these photographs of black men from the 20s wearing tuxedos and evening dresses...?". They were my heroes. They're not the only heroes in my life, but they were my first heroes, and they remain inside me.

[Audio: Lord Kitchener and Friends. "London Is The Place For Me" from *London Is The Place For Me: Trinidadian Calypso In London, 1950-1956*. Honest Jon's (1951/2002)]

Britain and the Windrush Generation

Today, this very day is the 75th anniversary of the day that nearly 500 Caribbean people disembarked from the Empire Windrush the 22nd of June 1948 — when I would have been six years old —. Historically, that was a very important day in the history of this country because at that time there were some black communities in port cities like Cardiff, Liverpool, South Shields, and places like Manchester and in London, of course. They wouldn't have been known to me because I didn't grow up in that kind of area. Black people were very rare for most, the many white people in Britain had never seen a black face for years. It's hard to imagine it today when you look at London... In fact, I think I can't remember what the percentage of non-white people is in London now, black, and brown people... It's very large and, by the middle of the century this country will be half and half black and white, which is an incredible success story. Despite all the problems and racism that has been here, people have established themselves and made lives here and, of course, when I was in my early days as a child, it coincided

with the arrival of not only the Empire Windrush, there were other ships but that's the most famous one.

And we used to pass by a street corner in Brixton which was right near to where I lived in South London and see people of colour just standing on the street corner talking. You know, I said to my mother: "Who are those people?", I wanted to know because they looked interesting and exciting really because they dressed very flamboyantly compared to conservative English ways of dressing, and she didn't know how to answer me because to her it was probably a great shock to see all these people standing there. And then I met different people through... I used to go regularly to church... A lot of people coming from the Caribbean had trouble with the English churches where they were not made welcome. But our church was different, and people were made welcome and somehow, in my mind, I knew that I'd read the books about jazz, and I knew that it was something that black people played, so I sort of gravitated towards them and wanted to speak to them and I met a man who was a pastor in the church. He was a canon in the church in Sudan, in the right and in the middle of Africa, and I invited him to our house for tea and he was very friendly, and my mother was welcoming to him. I was very fortunate that she was... Because she was a bit reluctant at first, but after a while, she realised that she had nothing to fear. She was born in 1904, she was a Victorian, almost really... Her parents were Victorians.

[Audio: West African Rhythm Brothers. "Ominira" from *Ominira/Gbonimawo*. Honest Jon's (1959/2005)]

My mother... She had her reservations at first because this was an unknown world for her. "Who were these people?". There was a lot of negative comments going on — especially in the press —, but she met people through me, and then later on, through my brother in fact, and so she became an unprejudiced person and very welcoming, and she always let me bring home anybody I wanted to and, in that way, I was able to invite a lot of the American musicians to my house. We're sitting here doing this interview today at my mother's kitchen table, and Harry Carney and Charles Mingus had sat at this table, and Memphis Slim and Clark Terry and James Moody and Henry Coker and many other people, including (actually) Elton John and other people in pop music as well. They'd all sat at this table, and I thank her for her openness in letting me bring them all home with me; and also, at the same time going backstage at concerts, because I was that kind of person I had to get backstage whatever I was doing, even before I started to write, and go backstage and get autographs and take a few snapshots.

I started to see the world differently. But what happened was [that] I started to write for different jazz magazines and eventually I wrote for *Melody Maker* for years. I did interviews, I did reviews, I did previews sometimes... But I also worked for black magazines, and, for a while, I had a job in the office — just banging away at the typewriter and answering the phone —, at a magazine called *Tropic* that was edited by a man from Dominica in the Caribbean called Edward Scobie; Scobie was interested in the history of the black presence in England. I learned... He wrote these articles in the magazine about a lot of people that weren't particularly well known to the general public. I had that kind of education. But also, in the office, just sitting there... I just was there for about two and a half months, I think... Everybody in the world came through that door... Of course, I didn't know anything about that at the time. I was only 18, I didn't know anything.

But the thing was, every day when I went to work, I was in a black environment completely, which was quite astonishing really. And now I'm older and I write about some of those people that I met, and I look at the old magazines and I look at the advertisements and, of course, I know who the people are that put those advertisements in there. I remember them. Some of them are not particularly important, but they're all members of what we call now the Windrush Generation, the people who established themselves here and built a society and built families and are now completely part of this country. And as time went by, I realized that most white people... Yes, all right, some people knew more about music than I did and in technical way.

They would write reviews about Ellington's music or Charlie Parker in language I could hardly understand because I'm not a trained musician. But they're not interested in the world that those people come from, they're interested in the history. I mean, I'm speaking in a general way, because, of course, some people that would be interested, but they're interested in a general way. They're only interested in work, in the music and the world of the musician. They're not interested in the world of his mother or the world of his daughter or the world of his cousin.

I think it was because I had that early experience of working for *Tropic* magazine and being in a black world every day. And then I subsequently worked for another magazine called *Flamingo*, which sent me to West Africa, and of course that was another magical and difficult (in many ways) eye-opening experience. I went to four different countries [Gambia, Sierra Leone, Liberia and Nigeria] and produced dozens of articles and dozens of photographs. Most of them don't have my name on them. They're just published under pseudonyms or "from our special correspondent" or something. But learning all that, I realized that when I went to America, to the United States, to meet jazz musicians, blues musicians, I wanted to learn more about the music and where it came from, but not just where it came from, why it came from. It's a theory — that's well known now — that the African people in America were forbidden to read and write and a lot of people — particularly women, white women — taught them, taught people, but they did that and it was great. It was very dangerous to do that. So, the majority of people were illiterate at first and they had to have some way of carrying their history, and they carried it through music and we've seen music develop throughout African Americans. It's gone through many stages. There's many, many genres and great individuals, but there's great collectivity too. The collective experience... And it can be, especially in church. I don't think I would have appreciated as much as I did or learned so much from it if I hadn't worked for those black magazines and met all those people years ago when I was very young.

[Audio: Charlie Parker's Reboppers. "Now's The Time" from *The Complete Savoy & Dial Master Takes. Savoy Jazz (1945/2002)*]

Life behind the curtain

There was a man called Max Jones who wrote for *Melody Maker* for years and in fact people called him "Mr. Melody Maker" and I got to know him when I was very young. I wrote to him and said: "Have you got any old jazz magazines you don't want?". I was 14, and he said: "Come up to the office", and he gave me some old French — and I don't know Danish, I think... — jazz magazines that he didn't want. And so, of course, they were all very educational. I couldn't read them [the Danish ones]; the French, I

could read a bit, but lots of nice photographs and, you know, idea of musicians and so on...

And Max had a column — it changed its name several times — in *Melody Maker* every week, he wrote about meeting musicians. He would talk about them, come, you know, going for a drink, or maybe they came to his house, stayed at his house, they had breakfast together and so on, or they went to a club and so on, and suddenly there was this whole world away from the concert stage and the jazz club. You could buy a ticket and go and hear these wonderful people, but then when it was over, they went back, the curtain came down and you went home, but Max didn't. He went backstage and he had a life with these wonderful visitors and there was something about it that captured me. And you don't think about it consciously, but I knew I wanted to be like him and when I went backstage — it was very easy to go backstage in those days you just ask someone to take your people [and he/she] would invite you —, and I'd see Max backstage and I got to know him and he'd introduce me to people and I met, I met all the famous writers of jazz, going way back to the early days. I got to know one or two of them and people who've been around for years that they started listening to jazz in the 1930s, which he had... I didn't consciously think of myself as part of that world, but I did it more and more and it became a way of life really.

[Audio: McCoy Tyner. "Autumn Leaves" from *Today And Tomorrow*. Sparton Impulse! (1964/2009)]

First trips to New York in 1962 and 1966

When I went to America — I went to New York the first time for a couple of weeks —, I met lots of people, historical figures, which was wonderful. I was on the street corner... I met Zutty Singleton, who played drums in New Orleans, Ben Webster, the wonderful saxophone player, Babs Gonzales was a bebop singer, mad guy. And Philly Joe Jones, drummer, worked with Miles [Davis] and Tyree Glenn who played trombone. I met them all in the space of five minutes on the street corner and that was fantastic. Absolutely fantastic. Later on, I saw Ornette Coleman in the audience. I went to see The Jazztet, Art Farmer and Benny Golson, both of whom became my friends later, and I saw Ornette Coleman across a crowded room. Well, this is so amazing, it's just the whole history of jazz is there in New York, you can walk along the street, you bump into people and when I came back, I wrote a few... I used to do things for the little jazz magazines. I wrote a few interviews and then the second time I went back there. I met Sun Ra and Albert Ayler and the drummers, Sunny Murray and Milford Graves, Marion Brown, saxophone player, lots of people like that, Free Music people recording for ESP Records. And I went up to the *Melody Maker* and I don't think I dealt directly with Max, but he introduced me to the right person there and I sold these stories to them as my first stories in *Melody Maker* in 1966. I was already part of that world.



Val Wilmer, *Ornette Coleman at Newport, Rhode Island, USA, July 1971, 1971*. © Val Wilmer / Victoria and Albert Museum, London

I became on very good terms with a lot of musicians, particularly the younger people who were grateful for anybody who would give them the time of day or that people they felt they could use to advance their careers. Well, sometimes that was done blatantly and not particularly nicely, but other times they became my friends: Andrew Cyrille, the drummer, very fantastic guy, and Rashied Ali, fantastic people. But at the same time, I remember there was a writer called Peter Clayton and he edited *Jazz News*, which was one of the newspapers I worked for, and he said to me one day: "I could never do what you do. I could never get close to the musicians like you do, because I could never write anything critical about them." If I did... I think he had a point. Because I did write some critical reviews sometimes, sometimes I really regret it... I was just being sensational. But you know, you have to learn, you have to learn how to be a writer, to be a photographer, and you learn from your mistakes and there's a tendency to, when you first start off, there's a tendency to want to write everything and say everything you see, instead of keeping quiet. It's the same with photography.

[Audio: Milford Graves with Sunny Morgan. "Nothing 5-7" from *Percussion Ensemble*. ESP-Disk (1965/2008)]

As Serious As Your Life and the Free Jazz movement

I gradually became part of the scene and I think — by going to New York a lot —, I had another life there. At one time, I wanted to live there, and I went backwards and forwards and stayed with different people, never had any money. I regret that because I could never go to all the places I wanted to go to, but I heard a lot of music and I was

there when the Free Jazz movement was in full swing, really. So, I met all the new people who came along that nobody'd heard of in England and went to all these sessions in different cafes and lofts later — the people's lofts —. And so therefore, that was how I was able to write my book, *As Serious As Your Life*, because it's a book about being there while it was happening.

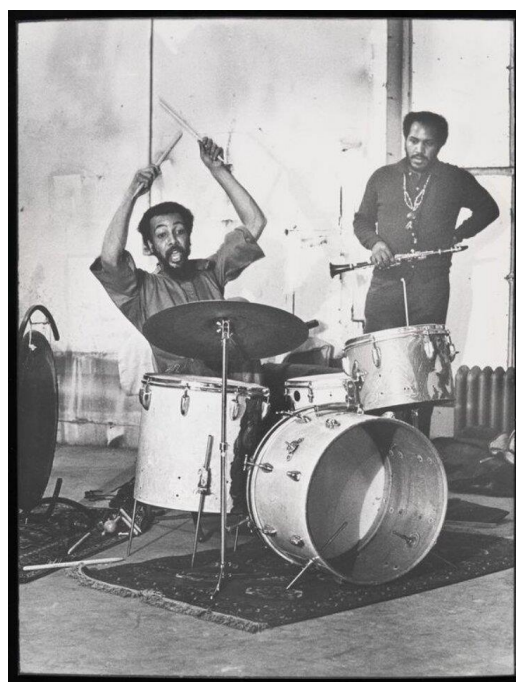
I was just interviewing people, and I used what they told me to learn from and I wrote the articles from what they told me. I was critical about some things and expressed my point of view about certain things in the book, but I don't think many people have ever written a book about a movement as it was happening in the jazz world. I'm quiet, I'm quite proud of that achievement.

[Audio: Sunny Murray. "Phase 1.2.3.4" from Sunny Murray. ESP-Disk (1965/2007)]

The traditional view of jazz is a rather reactionary and a rather conservative one. The early writers, they carried on for years writing. They say: "No, Charlie Parker wasn't jazz, it all ended before then." And then they say: "It all ended with after Miles Davis", or whatever it is the story, there's always a cut-off point and, of course, if you're an intelligent person you know that's ridiculous because people move between movements and also you hear echoes of something in the new music.

I knew about some of the Free musicians when I went to New York the second time. Well, I knew about Ornette Coleman when I went to New York first time because I saw him. I had a friend called John Hopkins who was a photographer at that time. He didn't stay as a photographer, but he knew Bernard Stollman of ESP Records and I was going back to New York in 1966 and he said to me: "Listen, Val", he said. "When you go there", he said, "don't hang out all those old guys." He said: "You want to check out these new musicians?", and he gave me Stollman's phone number and he gave me numbers for other people.

I can't remember who it was now, but I met Sun Ra, I met Albert Ayler, I met Milford Graves and Sunny Murray, I met Marion Brown, I think I met Bobby Hutchison. I met lots of different people and I interviewed them — Cecil Taylor, of course —, but I didn't hear them play because they weren't. They weren't doing anything at the time. What I did have... I came back from it, meeting Bernard Stollman at ESP with a whole pile of records and I took them back to the people where I was staying — who were great jazz fans —, and we played, started to play them and they freaked out, they could stay up all night. And I found Albert Ayler very difficult, I must say... Later on, I came to appreciate him a lot and I liked his music a lot.



Val Wilmer, *El baterista Milford Graves, Harlem Music Centre, Nueva York, octubre de 1971, 1971.* © Val Wilmer / Victoria and Albert Museum, Londres

[Audio: Albert Ayler Quintet. "Holy Family" from *Sadness/Holy Family*. ESP-Disk (1965/2012)]

I know a lot of musicians don't like to hear it, but it did reflect what was going on in society. It's after the Civil Rights movement, Freedom Riders, and the voter registration in the South. That was that had passed or was about to pass that era when this new music came into being. I mean, there's no one day when it came into being, of course, but that sort of echoed, that dissatisfaction with the idea of integration, because integration was the goal for everybody in the 50s and it had been for years. And, of course, for African American people, who thought in a certain way, it was seen as a sham. That integration really didn't mean a thing. It was all right for people in the South who needed to vote, but it didn't mean anything in New York or Chicago, and that's when the Black Liberation movement started. It takes all shapes and forms, and part of it to do with Marxist-Leninism, with the Panthers and then also the Nation of Islam, which it's not a religious movement, really. It's a black nationalist movement, and a lot of the musicians were part of all those worlds, some of them in the Nation of Islam, some of them in the Panthers and I met a lot of these people and Marion Brown, who I mentioned earlier on, the saxophone player from Georgia, was a wonderful inspiration to me and help because from that brief meeting in 1966, he had detected that I was a person who wanted to learn and could be used to spread the gospel. So, he used to send me books written by black writers, and he sent me copies of the *Black Panther* on a regular basis, and he also sent me copies of what was then called *Muhammad Speaks*, which was the newspaper of the Nation of Islam. These were terrific eye-openers as to what was going on in America that I didn't know, that I hadn't known anything of. While I was hanging out with people in the Duke Ellington band, I would get some ideas of it but, of course, even some of those people voted republican, they weren't necessarily democratic in American terms. You read about James Brown playing a concert for the Nation of Islam and about no white people I knew, knew about that or, in fact, hardly knew what I was talking about if I told them that, but I found it incredibly fascinating.

And the Black Panthers, with their breakfast program for children [Free Breakfast for Children], which we're only just starting to realise here, is very important. And they were pilloried and killed by the FBI because [they] said they saw them [Black Panthers] carrying arms. Of course, they knew they had the right to carry arms, based on the American Constitution. A crowd of angry black men in the street carrying heavy-duty weapons was not particularly welcomed to the FBI or the CIA, so they gradually eliminated them one by one way or another. They either killed them or they [Black Panthers] fled the country, and things like that, but that was the background. I mean, a lot of black people today — musicians — would say: "Oh well, that's nothing to do with us. You know, we're not part of that movement", but that's what it came from. I'd go to people's houses and, of course, Malcolm X was the main figure, who was very revered for many reasons, and he broke with Elijah Muhammad of the Nation and Islam, and he went to Mecca and realized that he was praying with white people as well, who were muslim, and he changed his whole idea. He didn't believe in black supremacy anymore. He became a revered figure. In the past, I'd been in the South and people had pictures of Martin Luther King and John F. Kennedy on the walls. But when I was in New York they had pictures of Malcolm X and these were people who were not politically active people, but everywhere you went there was a picture of Malcolm on the wall and that is very educational, it moves you. You're a white person, but it tells you something and you have to stop and think what's going on here. You don't have to, you don't have to stop and think, but if you're me, you do.

Three Icons of Free Music: Ornette Coleman, Sun Ra and Albert Ayler

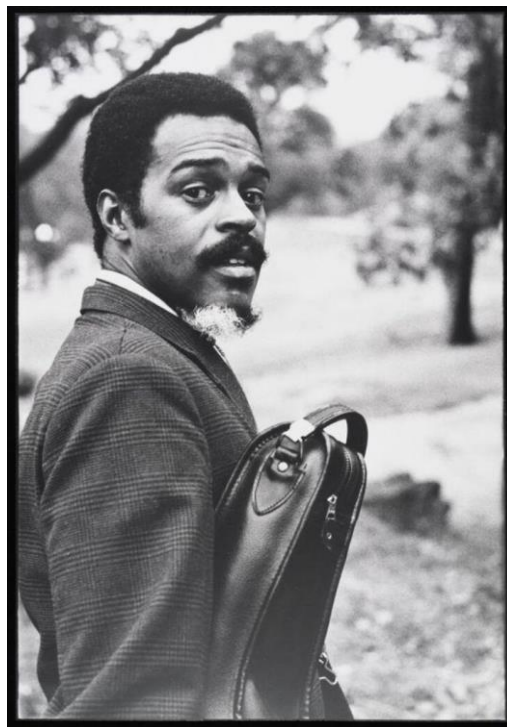
[Audio: Ornette Coleman. "Free Jazz" from *Free Jazz: A Collective Improvisation*. Atlantic (1960/2015)]

I think Ornette Coleman personifies everything that I love about jazz or black music. He's got the spirit that goes right back to the beginning of time. He's got the spontaneity and the conversation with other musicians and it just defies all belief to me that people today, musicians, still don't care for him, because he doesn't follow the rules. But whoever followed the rules? Picasso didn't follow the rules. I don't suppose Rembrandt followed the rules. He's the spirit of jazz personified. He's no longer with us. I don't know where he is... But I feel it's a shame I'll never see him again. That's probably my greatest regret about music: that I'll never see Ornette Coleman again. But I saw him many times and I was very privileged to live at his loft for... — I can't remember it's either five or six weeks in 1971 —, when I got stranded in New York and he gave me a place to stay. That was one of the most wonderful things that ever happened to me. A generous, a very, very generous man.

[Audio: Sun Ra. "Dancing In The Sun" from *The Heliocentric Worlds Of Sun Ra (Vol. 1)*. ESP-Disk (1965/2010)]

The other people... I think Sun Ra... Sun Ra's like Duke Ellington in the fact that he kept his band going for so long. But unlike Ellington, who had these all his compositions, the royalties from his compositions to pay his band, Sun Ra had very little, and he had to scuffle and think of ways of making a living, to keep the band together. I think he was tyrannical. He was very strict in his rules about how they should live. But on the other hand, he produced a lot of magnificent music.

I'm not saying always records are wonderful. There's a lot of records which are very ordinary. But in person that band was so exciting, and it carried on under Marshall Allen, who's still just about doing it now, he's nearly a hundred years old, he's still doing it.



Val Wilmer, *Albert Ayler, taken in the open air in New York, September 1966, 1966*. © Val Wilmer / Victoria and Albert Museum, London

[Audio: Albert Ayler. "Omega Is The Alpha" from *Live In Greenwich Village - The Complete Impulse Recordings*. Impulse! (1967/1998)]

The other person let's see... Albert Ayler, I suppose. Albert is Albert's not the sort of person you sit down and have a comfortable listen to him, but I did hear him playing in person and I spent a lot of time listening to his records and he (again) was a free spirit who did something new that no one had done before. Really, what he did was quite

simple, in some ways, quite extraordinary. And was it revolutionary? I suppose it was, but in a way, it was very simple what he did, but he did it in an extraordinary way and he certainly makes people listen or either that or they run out of the room in horror. I don't think there's been anybody since him that has done anything that's tops that, really.

[Audio: Marion Brown Quartet. "La Sorrella" from *Why Not?*. ESP-Disk (1968/2009)]

Learning and Listening

Learning from experience is never easy. When you go to knock a nail in with a hammer and you hit your nail. It's not an easy experience, is it? But you try not to do it again. But you may do it again. And it's the same with political movements. Obviously, there were some places where white people were excluded completely, both on an individual level, where someone wouldn't have white people in their home or, on a community level, where there were places that were closed to whites, deliberately. It was said: "Only people of African descent". It makes you stop and think. I don't think I ever put myself into situations where I annoyed people. I was invited by people who saw in me, either that I was a genuine person or/and someone willing to learn — because not everybody's willing to learn —, or else I was someone they could use. That was important too. You've got to remember that.

But there were some friendships I made and I bless those people for making me welcome. I mean there was many days when I was very upset by what had happened in a one-to-one situation or in a group, but I've seen some white people push themselves in and... Like you know... We're all the same type of thing. But that's not a good idea and if you want to learn, you keep quiet and... I didn't want to speak out, there was nothing to say. I was learning all the time... You learn, you learn and go on learning.

It surprises me all the time how many people are reluctant to learn, how many white people... It's like men, men are reluctant to learn what women are saying. I could talk about that for a long time.

[Audio: Sonny Sharrock. "Black Woman" from *Black Woman. Water* (1969/2005)]

Can a musician survive without a hardworking partner? The unsung women behind the jazz world

Everywhere I went I was dealing with men. Men made music and that was it. You knew there were one or two women like Mary Lou Williams, Marian McPartland, Melba Liston, Lil Hardin... There were always people historically, you knew about them, and wanted to know more about them sometimes. But every time I go to see an interview of a musician, there's a wife in the background or a girlfriend or somebody, and they're important. In their off moments musicians would say: "Oh, I couldn't do anything without my old lady," or something like that. And I thought, "Yes, well, I'll interview them" and "I'll interview the men about what they feel about it". I could only interview certain men because they were the people, I felt that I could ask those questions to, because the only person who'd ever done this before (at that time) was a woman called Graciela Rava, who was married to Enrico Rava, the trumpet player from Italy. She did a series of interviews with musicians' wives for *Jazz Magazine* in France. But other than that, there were books about women musicians. They just came out, Sally Plaxton's book and Linda

Dahl's book. They just come out, but nobody was writing about women's support for their male partners, which is basically I mean, we weren't even talking about gay women and lesbians. That wasn't even part of the thing I was discussing.

I remember when I first started to talk to somebody about it — a man to interview him —, I was very nervous because I thought he would turn round and say negative things, because that's what you heard it all the time, all this anti-women stuff. Art Lewis was his name, he was a drummer, he was very receptive and helpful. And Frank Lowe, saxophone player, a very good friend of mine and his wife as well, Carmen. He was wonderful. He was very helpful. I even talked to Ed Blackwell about it and I talked to Rashied Ali, I think. And Dennis Charles and Roger Blank, who[se] wife was Carol. I talked to Carol, I talked to Carmen, Frank's wife, and one or two women musicians.

I'm glad it's been commented on since by different people who've written books about women in music... Ingrid Monson, I think, and somebody else. They've written very positive things about me being the pioneer of that, which I would say it's very short. I said to a friend of mine once, well I said: "My thing about women's supportiveness in the jazz world is rather short." She said: "Val, jazz isn't a particularly feminist thing." I said, "No. Right, that's true."

[Audio: Marion Brown. "Porto Novo" from *Polydor. Black Lion (1969/1995)*]

Photography: More than just shapes

In 1973, I went back to West Africa, and I spent nearly three months in Porto Novo, in what was then Dahomey, which is now the People's Republic of Benin. When I came back, I wrote this article for the *British Journal of Photography*, which is prestigious journal and I called it "They make such beautiful shapes". And I was staying with an Englishman who was married to a friend of mine and one day we went for a drive in the evening and women were selling the fish that fishermen had brought in. They were selling it down by the sea and they were silhouetted by the light — sun was going down, a beautiful scenery. And he just suddenly said to me: "Look at that!" he said, "the people here make such beautiful shapes."

And I was horrified because although I knew it was true — from a visual point of view —, how could you talk about people like that? And he was a person who was married to an African woman. He lived that life there, they lived there for several years, he was a teacher, he was surrounded by African people, but he still could see them as shapes. And we must never see people as shapes, we must always see them, as you know, more than that.

So, when I came home, I wrote this article about responsibility, photographers' responsibility and so on, particularly pertaining to photographing other cultures in other countries.

[Audio: Ornette Coleman. "Lonely Woman" from *Lonely Woman. Atlantic (1959/2015)*]

Most of my early photography in this country [England] was about just ordinary things. It was weddings and parties, christenings and even funerals, and I didn't take the kind of photographs that are sort of celebrated as wonderful examples of photojournalism or documentary photography, because I was doing it for the people. They were jobs, and as a result of those pictures, as an offshoot almost, that I've got photographs that are I

didn't keep all my negatives for a start, unfortunately, but there's a few offshoots from those photographs which make, you know, extremely good images which are positive ones. Most after that it was musicians. I didn't really do that much but generally speaking; I believe in photographing people in a positive way.

That, to me, is the goal to show who a person is, rather than just what they do, because everybody takes photographs of individuals: who are doing what they do. But to try and say something about the person, something of their essence, is quite a challenge... I wouldn't say that all my photographs do that. By any manner of means, it's impossible. But I do try to show something of people. I think not the obvious. You don't want the obvious. You don't want to go straight in on like modern, a lot of modern photography. Digital photography is about showing every hair and every pore and every mark on someone's face. I don't believe it. I don't like that kind of photography. It's too confrontational and superficial. Sometimes it's all right, but you like to get an idea of the person and that's what I've tried to do and it's not easy to take photographs like that, because sometimes you've got to get yourself almost into their mind.

I mean it sounds pretentious, but you've got to be sort of thinking the way they are. To some extent it does sound pretentious, I know, but I can't express it any other way.

[Audio: Melba Liston. "You Don't Say" from *Melba Liston and Her 'Bones*. Fresh Sound Records (1960/2006)]

The Women's Movement and FORMAT

The women's movement was very, very strong here and a lot of us were. You know, there were a lot of us who'd been around, and we'd been having... We sort of made our own way in a very difficult male world and I suppose for a while we didn't see why we needed to be part of a movement. But gradually everybody did. Really, who was not doing anything? Well, some people were resistant, but I think most people were involved and, of course, we knew those of us who knew about the civil rights movement knew that the American women's movement grew out of the civil rights movement. It was started by white people who'd been part of that. You know the Freedom Voter Registration Campaign and the Freedom Riders and so on. So I think I brought that in my mind. That was in my mind, not at the forefront of my mind, but it was all part of you know who you are and how you go about things.

[Audio: Mary Lou Williams Trio. "Free Spirits" from *Free Spirits*. SteepleChase (1976)]

In 1983, Maggie Murray, who was a friend of mine at college studying photography, she and I started an agency called Format, which is the first women's photographic agency. We've just had our 40th anniversary. We've got an exhibition on it at the moment called *Format at 40*.

We spent about a year and several months meeting. We invited all the women that we knew who photographers and we were used to meet regularly and we worked out what we wanted the agency to be about. We wanted it to foreground the work of women photographers. We wanted it to help women photographers to achieve recognition and respect and we wanted to produce images that would alter perceptions of women in the workplace or in society generally. I mean, we didn't only photograph women's affairs or women's concerns. We were all very different people —

eight of us — [Maggie Murray, Sheila Gray, Pam Isherwood, Anita Corbin, Jenny Matthews, Joanne O'Brien, Raissa Page and Val Wilmer].

And we all did very different kinds of photography and different kinds of work and we were misrepresenteded at various stages by people who said: "Oh well, they just do women's stuff and everything", which I think was one of the factors that led to the agency not continuing. Mainly it was the rise of Getty. Getty is an agency and everything and the small agencies couldn't carry on. We lasted for 20 years and when we had our celebrations this May — just a few weeks ago — we had a party. It was just for family and friends and people just sat round and Maggie made a speech, I made a speech and one of the other photographers made a speech and that was supposed to be it. We were supposed to go and have a drink and that was it. But other people started talking from the floor and it was beautiful because they told all sorts of stories that none of us knew about each other. I think Maggie and then I did talk about the people who had helped us when we started out, and one of them was *The Economist*. Well, I should say before I say that... In this consciousness raising aspect of the agency. If somebody wanted a photograph of somebody doing a job where normally it would be a man, we'd send them a picture of a woman, and if they wanted a picture of somebody else where it'd be a white person, we'd send them a picture of someone black or brown. So, we changed a lot of perceptions of things and educated people.

Going back to the people who helped us, *The Economist*, business magazine, and it's not very well known for its photographs or anything. In the end, anyway, when Format ceased, publications, one of the photographers rang them up, *The Economist*, to say: "We were going out of business." And he said: "Well, I'm really sorry about that and it's a shame." And he said, "I want you to know one thing you've changed a lot" and that was the best compliment we could have that we had changed people's perception of who does what in the world. Looking back, you think, "Oh well, what's this got to do with jazz?". Well, it's got nothing to do with it, but on the other hand, it's got everything to do with it, because it makes you see the world differently.

[Audio: New Orleans Wanderers. "Perdido Street Blues" from Johnny Dodds. Classics (1926/1991)]