

Melba Liston

Melba Liston was an African-American musician who became a brilliant star of the jazz world. Though best known as a composer and arranger, her incredible skill as a trombonist meant she also achieved fame as an instrumentalist, and she worked alongside some of the biggest names in music. Her unprecedented and varied career spanned five decades, seeing her become one of the industry's extreme rarities; a successful female trombonist.

Melba was born in Kansas City in 1926, and when she was seven years old she was offered a choice of instruments to learn as part of her elementary school's music programme. She chose a trombone because she found it beautiful. Only a year later she played it well enough to perform solo on local radio. In 1937, Melba and her mother moved to California where, at the age of sixteen, she took up her first professional engagement with the pit band of the Los Angeles Lincoln Theatre. Not only did she play there, but she also wrote and arranged musical scores for other performers.

Melba then joined composer and trumpeter, Gerald Wilson, both as a musician and as his assistant arranger, in his newly-formed big band. She also worked with tenor saxophonist Dexter Gordon at this time, and the pair recorded a track called Mischievous Lady which Gordon had written especially as a tribute for her. Melba was starting to excel as a soloist and Dizzie Gillespie was so impressed with her skill that, when Gerald Wilson's orchestra disbanded in 1948, he asked her to join his ensemble.

Melba played with Gillespie and his band in New York alongside musical luminaries such as John Coltrane and John Lewis. She loved working with such a progressive and exciting band but, due to financial constraints, the orchestra broke up only a year later.

After a short time touring with Count Basie, Melba joined the band hired to accompany Billie Holiday for a tour of America's South. This was an extremely unhappy and difficult time in Melba's career. The audiences were mostly small and indifferent, and she faced a great deal of hardship whilst on the road. Later in life, Melba would also speak of the profound difficulties she experienced being a woman in the music industry during this era. She not only found herself disregarded and ignored, but also suffered abuse, discrimination and even sexual assault.^{[1][2][3][4][5][6][7][8][9][10]} When the tour with Billie Holiday came to an end, Melba was so disillusioned with the music industry that she temporarily turned her back on it. She returned to Los Angeles to take a clerical job at the Board of Education and also supplemented her income by taking small acting roles in several Hollywood movies.

Happily, during the late 1950s, Melba was lured back to music and joined Dizzie Gillespie's latest big bebop band for tours to the Middle East, Asia and South America. She was both a writer and an arranger for the band and most commentators agree that she produced some of her finest work at this time.

In 1958, Melba formed her own all-female quintet and also recorded her only album as a band leader, Melba Liston & Her Bones – widely regarded as a jazz classic. She then went on to work with trumpeter Quincy Jones, who had formed a band to tour Europe with his Free and Easy show. She wrote consistently for this band, particularly standards and ballads, and continued to work with Jones when the ensemble returned to New York.

Across the following decade, Melba lived in New York, working as a freelance arranger and composer with various recording companies and for many prestigious artists, including Tony Bennett and Diana Ross. She also embarked on a wonderfully creative collaboration with pianist Randy Weston. The pair would work together for many years to come, producing a number of highly regarded and innovative recordings.

In 1973, Melba's career took a different direction. She moved to Jamaica for six years and served as the Director of Popular Music Studies at the Jamaica Institute of Music. In 1975, she wrote and arranged the score for a film called Smile Orange, a sortie into Reggae music. On returning to the USA in 1979, Melba formed an all-female jazz band called the Melba Liston Company which headlined at the Kansas City Women's Jazz Festival.

Throughout the 1980s Melba continued to be actively involved in the jazz music scene as an arranger and composer, and in 1987 was awarded the Jazz Masters Fellowship of the National Endowment for the Arts. Sadly, her health began to decline in 1986 with the first of several strokes. She died in 1999 having made a unique and remarkable contribution to the music of the 20th Century.