

Women's rhythms

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BackBeat
with Cornelius Thomas

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IN THE male dominated genre of jazz, there have always been a few outstanding women who held their own — Billie Holiday, Sarah Vaughn, Ella Fitzgerald, Dee Dee Bridgewater. But they have been largely confined to realms of song and diva-dom. That has been the extent of women's contribution to jazz.

But Newcastle-born Hazel Leach, 44, took the gender-circumscribed world of jazz by the horns, and challenged men in their own trio-combo, big-band orchestra backyard. The result was that, eventually, with her United Women's Orchestra, she placed women on the centre stage of world jazz.

Leach cut her musical teeth in Northumberland. She studied at the Newcastle School of Music, completing a combined jazz and classical music course, which included composition and arranging. She spent some years blowing the tenor saxophone in the pubs and clubs of England.

But, with the acultural atmosphere of the gritty industrial town and football hooliganism creeping in on her, she gravitated to the Netherlands in 1979, where she studied the flute.

The cultural atmosphere on the continent treated her well. She stayed on to take a degree in education even while studying the flute and tenor saxophone and doing concerts. And since 1985, she's lectured in theory, history and arranging in the jazz department of the Arnhem Conservatorium.

In 1993, Leach responded to an advertisement and attended a big band workshop for women. Here she met women instrumentalists who were eager to learn and to work in a team context. Leach assumed leadership and gradually an organic outfit emerged — an all-women big band, the United Women's Orchestra.

For Leach, the most enriching experience of this process derived from working with a 37-year-old German, Christina Fuchs, also a tenor saxophonist.

A conductor and composer,



GENDER-FREE JAZZ: Hazel Leach and her United Women's Orchestra explode the myth that jazz is a male thing.

Fuchs plays saxophone and bass clarinet. She divides her time between playing and composing, mainly for her own ensembles. Her approach is multi-disciplinary and her style includes elements from New Music and avant-garde jazz. These complemented the folksy jazz of Leach well.

Last year, the Leach-Fuchs collaboration paid off when the United Women's Orchestra won first prize in the acclaimed Sardinian Scrivere Jazz 2000 competition, organised every two years by the Blue Note Big Band of Sardinia.

The UWO also brought out their first CD, *The Blue One*, last year. The compositions and arrangements of the Leach-Fuchs

team on this album are genderless, quintessential jazz, yet uniquely new.

In a recent interview with the Dutch magazine, *Jazz*, Leach concedes that both the name and the art of the group was, "in a certain sense", a political statement. This was necessary, she said, because she wanted to explode the treble prejudices that still existed in the industry against the phenomenon of white women playing jazz instruments big band style.

Leach and Fuchs believe in the role model value of action. In this sense, they are cutting a path for women through the male-defined jungle of the jazz industry. And, judging by *The Blue One*, the jazz world is richer for it.