

Jazz Backstory Podcast

Episode #9 — Why Jazz?, Part 1

[Musical Introduction]

Welcome to Jazz Backstory, Season 2, our second set after the break.

My name is Monk Rowe, and I am the Joe Williams Director of the Fillius Jazz Archive at Hamilton College. Our jazz oral history project, initiated in 1995, now consists of 450 video interviews with jazz personalities, a diverse collection of performers from multiple generations and jazz eras. This podcast offers audio excerpts from these sessions, focused on a variety of topics connected to the jazz life. In Season 1 we heard tales of young people inspired by jazz and the learning process that followed, thoughts on the art of improvisation and poignant and humorous anecdotes about the day to day life of working jazz musicians. Our topic for the first two episodes of Season 2 is “Why Jazz?” After the initial attraction and subsequent exploration of jazz, what made these musicians stick with it?

Before we go, let’s hear a lick from our own Orchestra in A Nutshell.

[Musical Interlude]

I see from our program notes, that’s called 2 Beat, 10 bars, hmm catchy title.

For those of you who have tuned into our first season, you may notice an updated sound to our orchestra. Enthusiastic response to Season 1 has enabled an expansion from a duo to a quartet. And after gathering permission from various agents, managers, ASCAP, BMI and the AFof M I am able to announce their names on air. Bassist Sean Peters, drummer Tom McGrath, guitarist John Hutson and yours truly on the alto sax comprises our new Orchestra in A Nutshell. We’re going to need a bigger nut.

[riff]

That’s right ladies and gentlemen, jazz and vaudeville are alive and well.

In Season 1, a number of successful jazz artists shared childhood stories of musical inspiration. As kids, we all see and hear things that we’re attracted to, after all who doesn’t like puppies, but most of us don’t become veterinarians. To commit to a life in music those early experiences had to be followed by

subsequent positive stimulation, affecting both heart and soul. Pianist Hal Galper, in a recent interview, explained it this way.. and I quote “I have a belief that you’re born with a whole bunch of neutral neurological neurons waiting to be stimulated from the environment, and the environment stimulates the growth of these neurons. When I heard that George Shearing record that lit up those neurons.”

Here is vocalist and NEA Jazz Master Sheila Jordan from our 2002 interview, describing how she treasures the moments that light her up.

MR: Is music at all spiritual to you?

SJ: Oh God it’s the most spiritual thing in the world. I’ve had spiritual experiences, which I’m sure — and one time I read about Sonny Rollins having this, and I see him every once in a while, well I used to see him more because when I take the train from Hudson back to New York City, when I have to go back to Manhattan, because I still maintain an apartment there, I used to see Sonny and his wife. And he would like buy me breakfast on the train you know. And we’d talk about — and I said, “You know, man, I’ve got to tell you something. I read something that you said one time in an interview” and I said, “and I’ve written about this too, and it’s the feeling of that spiritual experience where it’s not you doing it. Like you leave your body kind of thing. And you’re floating over. I know this sounds totally out.” But maybe you’ve experienced it. But you don’t get it that often. I think I can count on one hand, and leave a few fingers free, the times I’ve felt it. But when it hits, oh my God, it’s unbelievable. The feeling is so overwhelming that you’re just floating. And you’re watching yourself almost. It’s like you leave your body and you’re floating over this form which is you.. Like it’s almost like you look around and say oh, who sang that? Did you ever have that happen?

MR: I don’t think I have.

SJ: Oh well you’re young yet. It’ll happen. Give yourself time.

I’ll make note that this was the last time anyone called me young. At 93, Ms. Jordan is still lighting up audiences and expressing her appreciation in being part of the jazz canon. After our interview I had the pleasure of accompanying her on a blues, here is the tail end of that spontaneous jam:

[Sheila Jordan riffs to Monk’s piano accompaniment]

I used to forge my mother's birth certificate, wore a hat with a veil, high heeled shoes that were killing my feet, smoking my Lucky Strike cigarettes/I's gonna get in the door to hear the Bird but the man said, I think you better be home doin' your homework. So we went round in the alley, sitting on the garbage cans. Me and Tommy Flanagan and Kenny Burrell and Barry Harris. Bird knew we were there and he opened up the door and he played his heart out for us. Oh what a treat, what a treat, what a treat, what a treat, what a treat, what a treat for a 15 year old kid that loved jazz. Well if it wasn't for jazz music/I wouldn't be alive today. If it wasn't for jazz music/I would be alive today. Because back when I was just a skinny little kid by the nickname of Jeannie Dawson running down on [inaudible] in Detroit Michigan so I could buy all those 78 records to hear Bud Powell and Thelonious Monk and Miles Davis and Roy Haynes and Max Roach and Duke Ellington and Count Basie and Lester Young and Fats Navarro and Ella Fitzgerald and Sarah Vaughn and Billie Holiday and on and on and on and on. I wouldn't be up here in my house in Hunter's Land New York with Monk Rowe singing for you today. No, no.

At the time, I didn't have a definition for my feelings during that duet, but Hal Galper statement applies "My neurological neurons were highly stimulated.

Let's turn to another vocalist, Diane Reeves, who like Sheila Jordan, feels deeply about the importance of jazz in her life. This from our 2001 interview conducted before she took the stage at Hamilton College.

DR: Music saved my life. And I know growing up the music that I would listen to was really a backdrop for the Civil Rights movement, for the Vietnam War, the music was full of hope and brotherhood and positivity on all levels, not just songs that had political or social meanings but also about how men felt about women, vice versa, all of it was very, very beautiful. And I needed to hear all of those things. For me I think performance is more like meditation than it is giving a performance. It's a spiritual place for me. So I just want to make sure a lot of times that the words that I sing about or the things that I sing about are things that I really, really believe in my soul that are really, really a part of who I am. I feel that I come from a place, a foundation that allows for the celebration of uniqueness. That's how I view jazz music. And through that I am able to take the kinds of songs, lyrics, ideas and give them that kind of freedom, free sensibility, the ability to change from night to night and that's what I love. Because to me that's what life is.

And I think jazz is life. I equate jazz with life and life experience. I need to be able to take the music and breathe life in it, just like I learned. Just what I listen to — any time I put on a great jazz musician or a great jazz vocalist, there's life in the music. How do you make that? How do you draw a picture and make it have dimension? And I believe that there is power in words, and so that's why I select them to sing because I'm trying to get to that place.

In Season 1 we called on band leader and composer Maria Schneider to share a childhood music memory. She continues her story, here, especially noteworthy now, considering her phenomenal success in the jazz world.

MS: As far as jazz composition goes, when I did my undergrad at the University of Minnesota, there was no jazz program at that school. I also didn't have a jazz high school band or anything like that. I grew up, as a matter of fact, you know I'm from Minnesota, a very small town, and there was only one person in Windom that really knew anything about jazz, but she was an extraordinary stride player. This is kind of going off your question, but it kind of leads up, because my education really started with her. And as I was learning classical pieces, she taught me how to play in this old stride style. So we were learning standards and I would come up with my own piano arrangements of them basically, with a little bit of improvisation. And I learned to play out of a fake book. The thing is, she didn't tell me anything about the development of jazz. But I thought that jazz had died and I felt really sad that I grew up in the wrong era, because I wanted to be part of that. So by the time I went to college for music, I thought well maybe I'll study composition. But I felt weird in the classical world. Because the classical world, in the universities especially, even more so at that time, tonality was something that, if you wrote something that was tonal, you were just shunned. And I remember I wrote a piece for two pianos that was on a sort of composer forum concert at the school or whatever. And there were people looking at each other, because everybody was writing sort of atonal music and this thing was very tonal and romantic. And I remember seeing two older composers looking at each other and giggling. And I remember feeling, I just don't have a place in this world in this music. And then I went to — two things happened at once. I went to a Bob Hope show, of all things, and they were backed up by a big band from the college. This is right when I started school, and I said oh my God, there's a big band. And there was this kid playing drums, and people improvising a little

bit. And I was like, oh my God, I want to — I had no idea this sort of thing existed. And then this guy who lived in the dorm down the hall from me, he heard me playing some old Ellington album, and he said, “Do you like jazz?” And I said, “Yeah, you know what that is?” And he said — well as it turned out, I didn’t know what it was, he knew what it was. He brought me all these records. He brought me Herbie Hancock “Head Hunters,” he brought me Coltrane, McCoy Tyner. I’d never heard a piano player play without a root before. So suddenly I heard all this modern jazz. And I’ll tell you, I was like in tears, because it was like oh my God, the dream came true that this music had evolved and I could be part of it.

It seems clear that both Sheila, Dianne and Maria didn’t just desire a life in jazz but were actually compelled to pursue it, reminiscent of Phil Woods’ advice about pursuing jazz only if you have no other career choice. Another saxophonist Billy Mitchell, concisely describes that concept:

BM: Well that’s it. You don’t play music because you necessarily want to. You, when I say “play music” I mean you don’t follow a musician’s life and lifestyle unless you really have to. You can’t do anything else. I like to say it’s a calling.

[Musical Interlude]

Time for our jazz vocabulary word of the week. If you listened intently to Season 1 you’ll recall our insider jazz terms, here’s an uptempo review: vocalese, lick, riff, tune, gig, oral O-R-A-L and aural A-U-R-A-L, the blue notes, jam session/cutting contest, improvisation, song form, chorus, club dates and casuals. If this makes you want to go back and check out Episodes 1-8 for the first time or for a second listening, I’m all for that.

Our episode 9 vocabulary word is “standards,” as in THE standards, the songs any self-respecting jazz player should know. Jazz musicians have always been creative but also opportunistic, composing their own jazz compositions while borrowing and adapting songs from Broadway musicals and popular tunes written predominantly in the 1930s & 40s. These sophisticated compositions make up The Great American Songbook, the G-A-S. Even today, a typical set by a jazz group will include offerings from both sources, tunes by Thelonious Monk, Herbie Hancock, Dave Brubeck, Mary Lou Williams and

many others, as well as the Great American Songbook entries from George Gershwin, Cole Porter, Rodgers and Hart and Jerome Kern. The majority of these songs were written at the piano and included sophisticated chord progressions and song forms. As an aside, it's been my observation that guitar based songs from the 1950s have been less likely to attract jazz interpretations. Jazz journalists regularly pose the question, "Where will the next standards come from?" Well, as Fats Waller said "One never knows, do one?"

Let's take a moment with some key phrases from our interviewees heard so far in this episode. Describing their devotion and commitment to jazz, we heard Sheila Jordan call it the most spiritual thing in the world, Dianne Reeves stated that it saved her life, Maria Schneider shed tears when realizing she could be part of it and Billy Mitchell stated that it was a "calling." Pretty profound. The celebrated percussionist Don Alias had a less intense way of describing his ultimate career choice.

MR: What brought you to the conga drum?

DA: You know I don't know. Again, I never really thought about me being a professional musician. You know I went to school and studied medicine. You know my mom wanted me to be a doctor. And I went to a certain point and got my degree in biochemistry, but I got bit. I got bit seriously. I really — literally how it happened is that I had this wonderful job working in a research laboratory, cancer, up in Rhode Island, in hematology, it was a great laboratory. And I was also playing at night in Boston. So this trip back and forth, living in Providence and back to Boston, back and forth, and one day I walked into that laboratory and I sat down and I was dead tired, dead tired, and I sat down and said what is the thing that makes you the happiest? Come on now. What is it that really makes you happy for a length of time? And I chose to play music. And how I got to it, the earliest I could remember was I had a little small drum and I have no idea where I got it from, I can't remember, with a Chinese design on it. So I used to call it a Chinese drum. A Chinese design on it. And I used to start banging on that.

MR: Was your household musical at all?

DA: Yeah, matter of fact my uncle played organ and keyboard, he was a swinging organ player. He lived in Washington and he used to play some jobs over there. My mom played a little piano. My grandmother played a little violin. Nothing serious. You know nothing serious. And they actually

did make an attempt to send me and my brother to music lessons, piano you know. But at that period of time I wanted to be out playing basketball and stuff. I didn't want to be associated, you know. But every once in a while I would sneak in there, because we didn't have a piano, sneak in there and play some stuff.

MR: Well I'm wondering what the phone call to your mother was like when you decided to switch careers.

DA: Hell. That's the only thing, for want of a better word, thinking of a better word. Take into consideration the time. It was the 60s, the 50s and 60s. I'm a black American growing up in a certain kind of environment and the revolution wasn't really going on when I was going to school, I'm talking about '58, '59. It wasn't really prevalent then. There were no revolutionary activities around that time. Parents wanted their kids — I'm talking about Afro-American parents — wanted their kids to be doctors, lawyers, something with some kind of clout to it, intellectually, you know, clout to it. Stuff like that. And needless to say when I told her that I had quit my laboratory job she didn't like that. As a matter of fact it was only recently, when I say recently I'm talking about maybe seven years maybe, that she — I think she liked more the people I was playing with than the playing. I said, "Mom I'm playing with Miles Davis." "Oh Miles Davis." "Lou Rawls." "Oh Lou Rawls, oh." She would love all of that. But me being a musician, no she didn't want that. She was really upset about that.

MR: Gosh well she can at least brag to her neighbors perhaps.

DA: She did that. She did do that. Because I'd be there on a number of occasions when she'd turn around — "oh he played with —" moms, you know.

What is the thing that makes you the happiest?

In a perfect world, career counselors would frame that Don Alias quote and hang it strategically on their office wall. My high school guidance counselor recognized my music passion but encouraged I pursue the music education path as opposed to concentrating solely on being a professional, working musician. This was common practice at the time and jazz players of a certain era call it the old "fall-back-on" if the gigs aren't forthcoming you'll have something to fall back on. Our next episode will include interviewees addressing that annoying reality of making a living.

During our interview project I learned of another reason that aspiring musicians chose the jazz path, one that surprised me but in retrospect should not have. Almost without exception young instrumentalists learn to play in a traditional setting: learning to read music, play scales, etudes, and the standard repertoire for their particular instrument. This process takes place in a classical music environment and predictably can lead the more gifted players into that field. It may come as a surprise to us that throughout the twentieth century a significant number of young African-Americans have aspired to a career in the classical world, envisioning a life as a member of an established symphony orchestra. In the late 1930s trumpeter Joe Wilder attended the respected Mastbaum School of Music in Philadelphia and excelled as a classical trumpet soloist. Here's an excerpt from Edward Berger's biography of Joe Wilder:

Despite his continued commitment to classical music, at some point during his tenure at Mastbaum Wilder's goals began to shift as it began to dawn on him that a career with a major symphony orchestra was not realistic for an African-American musician coming of age in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Joe said, "I still hope to join a symphony orchestra but perhaps on a lower level." So while continuing his classical studies at Mastbaum the trumpeter began to work in some of the many local Philadelphia jazz groups. End of quote.

Twenty years later, bassist Ron Carter was simultaneously playing gigs and completing his bachelor's degree of music at the prestigious Eastman School of Music. He recognized that the symphonic life offered a more dependable income but heard straight from the top that it was not an option for him. Let's listen to Joe Wilder and Ron Carter speak to this topic:

MR: Were you classically trained as a musician?

JW: Me?

MR: Yeah.

JW: Oh, yeah. I had a lot of classical training. I went to the Mastbaum School in Philadelphia with Buddy DeFranco and Red Rodney, and a bunch of guys. And John LaPorta.

MR: Oh yeah. What were the opportunities like back at that time for a musician such as yourself?

JW: Well the opportunities for black musicians in the concert field were nil, I mean they just weren't there. And you sort of, I was still interested in classical music and because of that I guess I studied pretty hard at what I was doing at the time and I guess it gave me a little more momentum when I became a commercial player, it was a big help to me, discipline-wise and

things like that. But I must say because of having more interest at that point in classical music when I was younger, it inhibited my jazz playing a great deal because I just didn't feel comfortable and I didn't play very well actually. I was very stiff. Now, in later years of course I've been doing more of that and I feel more relaxed with it and probably play a little better at it.

MR: Right at that time, when you were about to graduate from Eastman, what were your career aspirations then?

RC: Well I thought that making gigs is one thing, you know twenty bucks a night and you play your brains out and have a great time, but I wasn't sure that that's what I wanted to do. And seeing what appeared to be a relatively stable financial environment as classical orchestral player, I said well I've spent four years here and this is my last two weeks at school I might as well find out what the deal is. And Leopold Stokowski, who was one of the guest conductors of the Philharmonic when I was there, took me aside when he was there for the one week, on the last day — it was like a four week — four day week. He would conduct four days and play the concert that night. And that's how they brought in some great conductors with this Eastman Philharmonic Orchestra. And he told me he'd like to have me with his orchestra down in Houston, but that he thought that the Board of Directors weren't ready to have a black person in the orchestra. And I said if this what they're telling him, and he's a major conductor, and they were one of the major orchestras, I mean, really. And he was blunt, he laid it right out you know.

Joe Wilder became an in-demand trumpet player and enjoyed an active and diverse career in the commercial music field as well as in jazz. Ron Carter is now the most recorded bassist in jazz history, playing an important role in a number of iconic jazz groups. They both were honored with a National Endowment of the Arts Jazz Master Award. We might conclude that even though their preferred career path was denied, it all worked out for the best for them and us, as we benefitted from their contribution to jazz. This would only provide a convenient rationalization of a segregated practice in the arts that is still with us.

Let's wrap up with an excerpt from our 1996 interview with saxophonist Flip Phillips that just may offer the ultimate reason and motivation for living the jazz life.

FP: My final saying like is, I played with the greatest musicians in the world, I think, the greatest. All the best. And I did come up in the greatest era of music the United States ever had. And I'm glad I was part of it you know. It was the greatest era I think. If you remember that era.

MR: It's quite a gift to the whole world.

FP: That's right. I'm glad I was a part of it. I'll drink to that.

MR: I'll drink to that. Double.

The greatest era of music the United States ever had.

That pretty much says it all, until the next episode when another group of jazz cats have more to say.

We'll hear from such notables as Norman Simmons, Ron Carter, and Ellis Marsalis. You can find Jazz Backstory at Hamilton.edu or on your favorite podcast platform. See you on the flip side.