

Jazz Backstory Podcast

Episode #10 — Why Jazz, Part 2

[Musical Introduction]

Welcome to Episode 10 of our Jazz Backstory podcast, part 2 of our topic “Why Jazz?” Last week we heard testimonies from eight musicians addressing their overwhelming desire to make a living in the creative art form we call jazz. I am assigning a subtitle to part 2, “why Jazz when the bread is so bad?” a fact summed up in one of the better oxymorons I have heard, “the rich jazz musician.” This particular topic requires placing our jazz vocabulary segment right up front. You have gathered by now that this music has numerous inside terms, some of which are dated now that jazz is a respected art form. In years past, if a musician was offered a gig, whether it was a one-nighter or an extended tour, they typically asked, “What’s the bread?” or even hipper, “What’s the taste like?” One of the jazz anecdotes that is still passed around concerned the lead trumpeter who was offered a long term gig with an established big band. When he asked about the weekly bread, the band leader replied, “Bean 80.” The trumpeter’s disgusted reply, “Bean 80, man, I got sparrows.” Translation. \$180 dollars a week, I have children. I rather dig the pre translation.

While it’s true that a select group of jazz artists have done quite well financially, it has usually gone hand in hand with longevity and expanding their skill set beyond just performing. We’ll address that topic in depth down the episode road.

[Musical Interlude]

Let’s get to it: Jazz and money (I mean bread). First up, guitarist Billy Bauer who in 1930, at age 17, was quite pleased with an enticing path to become a rich musician.

MR: Can I assume that your father eventually came to terms with your life as a musician?

BB: Well he wanted me to get a real job. That’s what he classed it as. So I said gee, I like what I’m doing. He said yeah but you’ve got to get a real job, you’re getting too old. I was about 18 or 17. He says you’ve got to get a job. He says come on down to the shop with me. So he brought me all the way down to 11th Street, down in New York where we are, and it was in the summer, and that means I had to take a trolley car to the subway, the subway and then I had to walk a couple of blocks to the thing, on a hot summer’s day. No air conditioner. He opened the door to get into this big shop, it was Vannery’s Press, He opened this door and the ink, the smell of ink hit me and I almost passed out. I said Pop, I can’t make it. I couldn’t see myself going there. So then he kept after me. You know he says geez, you’ve got to get something. So one of my friends who was a leader of one of the club date bands, he worked in Celanese, it’s an imitation silk, but it was just starting, so he says they’re hiring guys. So then he offered me a job in the underwear

department because the underwear department was new at Celanese. He says, “Will you go down there and condense the stock?” I said, “I don’t know what you mean, condense.” He says, “Well you know, put all the blues together and the sizes together.” I said okay. So I went down there and it was only a little room, it was just like here but bigger than that. So I put everything in order and I was sitting there. He come by and he says, “What’s the matter, where are you, why aren’t you working?” I said, “Well what do you want me to do?” He says, “I told you, condense.” I says, “I did.” So he comes in, and he looked at it and he says, “Hey, you want this job?” He says, “This job pays \$35.” And that was a lot of money, because he was only making about \$60 he told me at that time. He says, “And it’s going to be big, you’ll have guys under you.”

MR: And you were 16?

BB: Yeah, 16, or 17.

MR: Can you recall what kind of money you were making on those first engagements with this band?

BB: Well it’s different areas. When I first went out I was, there was days when everything was illegal. There was no liquor, so it was prohibition. So everything I went with, even club dates, if they served liquor it was illegal so the girls, we used to have a kitty. And we’d have three pieces, like a drummer, banjo and saxophone, that was it. And the girls would pass the band and say, “Hey, play ‘Melancholy Baby.’” And they’d give them a tip. So they’d throw — so one night I come home and I had twenty-five dollars on my dresser. Oh I didn’t get paid twenty-five dollars, I got paid something like three or four dollars. But if it was a good night with these girls, and everybody was drinking, then all the girls got them drunk, the more they — So my father woke me up, he says, “Where’d you get that money?” Because he was only making about forty five dollars a week. So I tell him, I says we had a very good night. There was a couple of guys there and they just kept on giving us tips, so that was my end, we made seventy-five dollars in tips, which was a good night. I was the leader, I made thirty-five dollars. Seven nights a week. And no hours. You got there at nine o’clock. But if there was people there at 3:30 —

MR: You just kept playing.

BB: Yeah. And seven nights too.

Hmm—sort underwear for 35 bucks a week or play music for \$25 a night. Billy Bauer did the math and continued to do what he loved, eventually alongside Charlie Parker, Benny Goodman, Lee Konitz and Lennie Tristano. We can assume his father grew to accept his career path.

Mr. Bauer is one of our very few interviewees that pointed to decent pay as a reason to become a professional musician. More typical are the players that balance the reality of the compensation with the

pursuit of the craft, the calling, as Billy Mitchell described it. During our 1999 interview in Los Angeles, saxophonist Lanny Morgan described the effort required to net \$30 with the Maynard Ferguson band of the early 1960s.

MR: What was the travel situation like, the road? Was it a tough grind in those days?

LM: Yes. Looking back at it you forget all those things you know. But — it was a wonderful experience but I wouldn't want to do it again. Yeah, because we had — we didn't have a bus, we had station wagons. And starting salary on that band was \$120 a week. I made \$135 because I was not only the lead alto player but played a lot of jazz too and because he'd known me. And so \$135 a week and he had two station wagons and then he drove himself, he had two jaguars — a Mark IX that never ran more than three or four blocks at a time, and that little white XKE or the predecessor to the XKE I guess. But I wound up driving one of the station wagons, and a friend of mine from Maine, Don Dunn wound up driving the other one. And well you can imagine, if you have a one-nighter in Chicago, I just found a pay receipt for this the other night, it was for \$23.65, a one-nighter in Chicago. Now out of that tax was taken, so you get about \$19.00. Out of that you have to pay for your own lodging and for food, so we used to stay at the Croyden Hotel in Chicago, that was like \$2.50 a night, another 50 cents if you wanted a black & white T.V. And say another six dollars for food maybe. So in other words you're coming home with \$11.00, \$11.50. So I took the driving job because we got one cent a mile. Well now Chicago is 960 miles I think it is, so I would come home with an extra \$18, or a little over \$19, plus my \$11, would be 30 bucks I would have seen?

MR: Yeah. Gee that was like an extra night of work.

LM: That's right. When I joined that band we rehearsed that day, the day I got back there, and the next day we opened at Birdland. And we opened for some reason, it seems like we played there for three weeks. Birdland usually booked people for two weeks but this was three weeks. And it was opposite Art Blakey, the band with Wayne Shorter and Lee Morgan and Curtis Fuller.

MR: Curtis Fuller? That sounds right.

LM: A good band. And then we went right away, we had one day off and we went to the Brooklyn Paramount and we played there opposite the Jazztet, the newly formed Jazztet, Art Farmer and—

MR: Benny Golson.

LM: Benny Golson and also another hot — King Curtis was on there, do you remember him?

MR: King Curtis was on that band?

LM: No, not on the band but he was there. I don't know if Jack McDuff was there or not, but I think they were together at that time. And that was another good show. That was for ten days. And

then we had about four gigs on the road — Pennsylvania, yeah, around Philly, in that area. And then, and I thought, this is wonderful. What is that, like 135 times 5 almost. I'm rolling. I was paying \$155 a week for a place at 85th and Broadway in Manhattan and I thought I'd died and gone to heaven. Then we didn't work for a month and a half see, and nobody was on retainer. Nobody was on a retainer. Everything was pro-rated when we did work. So the reality set in there. Because then I really went from wealthy to poor in about five weeks.

The music bug has a way of rearranging priorities, and musicians developed a talent for avoiding issues regarding monetary compensation. At some point it probably occurred to Lanny to do the math and calculate his hourly rate for that one nighter in Chicago, but I'm guessing he decided it was better not to know. My first significant paying gig occurred while I was in high school, New Years Eve, 1968, a four hour engagement with a local Ukranian-American polka band. I made \$30, just short of a third of a bean, and I, like Lanny Morgan, was in heaven. Sixteen years later, I was traveling and performing five to six nights a week with a progressive rock band, making \$200 a week, assuming no PA gear needed replacing or the truck tires held out. I definitely avoided the math. Some things never change. From a recent session, sax man Jerry Bergonzi speaks about supporting the gig habit.

JB: When I was twelve a friend of mine came over my house and his father was a trumpet player and he had a Miles record with Coltrane on it, and a Sonny Rollins record and an Art Blakey record with Wayne Shorter on it. I said oh my goodness. So that's when I really got the bug.

MR: Don't you think it's necessary to have that serious bug to go into jazz these days?

JB: Yeah I do. And you can even have a bug but if you have other bugs that you know, so, a friend of mine, Adam Nussbaum, always says, "You know there's only one reason you should get into jazz, 'cause you can't help it. There's nothing — that's just it." 'Cause if you have choices, take the other choice. I always tell people you've got to have a way to support your — especially in these days — your I'll call it a jazz habit but it could be a music habit — a way to support yourself. You know because the gigs are fewer, they pay the same that they paid forty years ago, and you used to be able to make a living, not a great living but playing. But today it's next to impossible.

The romanticized image of the struggling yet devoted jazz artist can be found in any genre of the music from Chicago jazz to the avante garde. The other worldly Sun Ra led his Arkestra, a gathering of forward thinking musicians who followed their leader's unique vision to unexplored destinations. Sun Ra and his acolytes clearly had a commitment that was not based on a weekly salary. Saxophonist Marshall Allen joined the newly formed Arkestra in 1958 and has led the group since the passing of Sun Ra in 1993. At age 98, Marshall continues to lead the ensemble and still waits for the topic under

discussion. In our December 2021 interview he recalled a conversation early on with Sun Ra, dating back 65 years.

MR: You were writing about the time that you were getting to know Sun Ra and you wanted to get going and he kept talking about the Bible and Egyptian mythology and then he said, “We’re going to play this music for the twenty-first century.” And you said, “I’ve got to wait that long?”

MA: Yeah. With no pay or half pay. No you mean I had to wait until the twenty-first century to make some money?

MR: Well now you’re in the twenty-first century, you’ve been doing it for 21 years.

MA: Still didn’t make no money. So I’m glad that the music, I’ve got the music, I put that out there.

MR: All right.

MA: I did something good. But the money ain’t come yet.

And that ladies and gentlemen is what musicians call paying dues.

Now it’s not my intention to create the impression that the jazz life is a constant uphill struggle where success is avoiding bankruptcy. A rich jazz musician may be a rare bird but there are numerous artists who manage to make a living wage by doing what they love. Trumpeter Jon Erik Kellso and pianist Bill Charlap come to mind.

JK: Yeah. Sometimes I think we were born in the wrong era.

MR: Funny you should say that, I’ve felt that way myself, yeah. Today, in the market, being a jazz musician, is it a — I don’t want to get too personal — is it a decent way to make a living? Is it hard?

JK: Yeah, I’d have to say it is not an easy way to make a living. But again, on the other hand, I’m really happy and fortunate and pleased to be doing what I’ve always wanted to do. And I make a living. I do okay. Let’s say this: it’s not an easy way to get rich. I didn’t get into music to become rich. But I do okay. I’ve always managed to be able to be a full time musician and pay my bills and you know, I do okay. But there’s only a select few really that do, that are able to do that, compared to the musicians that just decide well okay I’ll just do this on the side and have a “day gig” as they say.

MR: When we meet again down the line somewhere, can you envision things that will hopefully happen in your career for you?

BC: Well I remember people asking me even ten years ago what is it that you want to do? And the answer is I’m doing it. I mean I’m a musician. I remember something Dizzy Gillespie said, we should all get down on our knees and thank God we’re musicians. And I feel that way. I feel very blessed to have a life in this. And it’s not just about having a career in music. Someone said

something funny, you can make literally hundreds of dollars in this business. Listen, you're not going to be a millionaire. More than likely you may have a nice middle class income at some point if you're busy. But it's not about that. It's about the riches that you have by playing music, the joy that you get out of being able to express yourself on a very high and profound level at your instrument, just for yourself, or to give to other people. And beyond that what other career do you get to travel this way, see the world, get to know, there are no generation gaps, there are no racial gaps. I know people and I'm close with people of all generations and races — and I hate that word race anyway, it's only the human race. But all different backgrounds. And that's a wonderful life. So I wouldn't pass that up.

Jon Erik Kellso keeps classic jazz alive with his group The EarRegualars, who perform at the Ear Inn, regularly, in NY City. Hey, I made that in one pass! Bill Charlap continues to be an in demand soloist and accompanist while directing the vibrant jazz program at William Paterson University.

[Musical Interlude]

Here's a digression — do you recall the Jack Nicholson scene in “As Good As It Gets,” the one where he serenades that miniature dog, hoping a little dinner music will inspire him to eat. The tune was “Always Look on the Bright Side of Life. I thought of it while reading the transcript of our session with the late pianist Ellis Marsalis, native of New Orleans and patriarch of the musical Marsalis family. Ellis was interviewed during the Jazz Education Network 2020 conference, less than three months before his passing. I believe his lifelong attitude made his career possible. We'll follow Ellis with some wisdom from another pianist, Norman Simmons, a prized accompanist for two iconic vocalists, Carmen McRae and Joe Williams.

MR: Well just to wrap up here, if, let's suppose we went down in the lobby and we sat down for a cup of coffee and one of the hundreds of young musicians that are here at this convention happened to join us and said, “Mr. Marsalis, I really want to make a career in jazz. Do you have one piece of advice for me?”

EM: Only if he has to. I borrowed that phrase from — there was a show on T.V. which featured actors. I can't remember the host's name. And it was like a class and the actor was — with the guest would come on and he'd talk about his career to a class of would-be actors. And at one point one of the people at one of the students said, “I really like acting and I was wondering, you know, do you think I should continue being an actor?” And that's what he told him. He said, “Only if you have to.” And it's a strange way, not everybody would really understand that. You know. But I realized that that was pretty much how I lived my life. That was something that I had to do. It wasn't about well man you've got six sons, one who is autistic who is still living

with me now, and you know all these mouths to feed and how are you going to do that? But I never developed a defeatist attitude about it. I always figured that somehow it would work out. I mean I just believed that. Now that can be very naïve, in some cases it might be very stupid I don't know. But I really believed that somehow it was going to work out.

MR: And it looks like it did to me.

EM: Well at my age if it didn't it's too late to worry about it now.

MR: Was there a point, in your growing up in Chicago, where you started to feel that you had the confidence that you could actually make a living in this business?

NS: Well that's an interesting concept because I've always looked at it in a different way. I guess you might say in the artistic sense, that I didn't consider how I wanted to make a living, I just considered how I wanted to live. And that decision was made when I was in maybe my second year in high school. But anyway we had a course in careers and I decided to look at it and say well now if I decide to be an artist there's going to be someone over me. If maybe I'm going to be like painting pictures and waiting until I'm dead before I get any recognition from them, or I'm going to work in a situation where someone is going to be telling me what to do. I decided, in being who I was you know, in the black community, I said democracy was mostly represented in the music. This is where individuals accepted each other on another level other than the way the rest of society did. And I decided this is where I wanted to be in that situation. So it was how I wanted to live my life regardless of how much I was going to make. Because in those days making money, my goodness, when I left Carmen for instance, which was like 1970, to show you, I had an apartment in the Bronx with three big rooms in it, and my rent was only \$91 when I left there, \$91 a month. You know? And well you talked to Joe and he talked about places where you lived and your rent was \$15 a month or something, you know what I mean? So the times were different. So you didn't feel this — money wasn't that dominant entity that it is today. You know? It just wasn't there. The people who had money, they were some different other people. Most all the rest of us were kind of poor and so there was a different kind of community with everybody else on this same level of working hard, resting hard and playing hard.

“I really believed that somehow it was going to work out”. Thank you Ellis.”

.It was how I wanted to live my life regardless of how much I was going to make”. and thank you Norman Simmons. Have you noticed that jazz people are very quotable?

For the aspiring musicians who may be listening, or the parents of children who have the jazz bug, these interview excerpts may sound bleak, but they are only realistic. A life and career in any of the arts is a challenge, and the place one arrives at in their chosen field is often significantly left or right of the original target. But the path getting there is part of the ride and I can say this from experience—of all the artistic disciplines, music offers the most options. An aspiring jazz player can land gigs and make money for the rent in numerous related situations: funk bands, studio work, club dates and casuals or busking in the subway may not satisfy the jazz bug but at least they provide a setting to blow your horn. If these gigs are a serious drag, the motivation they provide to make them unnecessary, makes them worthwhile. I know for a fact that every musician we have heard so far in this podcast paid those dues, and it paid off.

You can view the full interviews on the Fillius Jazz YouTube channel and find our Jazz Backstory podcast at Hamilton.edu or at your favorite podcast provider. Next week, we focus on the concept of swing, as in, “It don’t mean a thing if you ain’t got it.”

We’ll close this episode with a riff on jazz similar to Flip Phillips’ tribute from Episode 9, this time from Keith Ingham, a pianist who definitely got the bug and left his home and country to become part of the jazz scene in America. See you on the flip side.

MR: Are there any counterparts of American musicians who’ve gone over to England and learned as much about your music as you have about —

KI: Well there’s not much I can say. What do you mean, the British music? I mean we never had anything as wonderful as jazz. You see, I think it comes from a melting pot society where you’ve got all these different strains coming together. This is the whole point. You had Italians here, so you have these wonderful lyric qualities; you have Afro-Americans as they’re called now, but you have that rhythmic thing maybe they brought, you know that looseness and that sense of swing; you had the Germans here so you have the correctness of intonation and things like that. You have that whole melting pot. And they all brought their music. You have the Russians with all that minor key, soul stuff. It’s wonderful. I mean Gershwin is Russian but also very Jewish and that kind of sad, soulful feeling that’s in his music is, I think more Jewish than Russian or American. I mean it’s just “Porgy and Bess” could almost be a Jewish opera rather than a black opera. But it’s wonderful. But it’s the melting pot that America is that made American music. That’s what it is. There’s nowhere else, nothing like it is there? There’s nothing like it in the

world. You're so lucky, don't lose it, because it's your great contribution to world culture. I mean it's your Beethoven, your Haydn, your Schubert, your Debussy, your Ravel your Elgar, your Henry Purcell or whatever you want to call. Your Rachmaninoffs, your Stravinskys it's all there. It's Duke Ellington, it's Fats Waller, it's Henry "Red" Allen, it's Bix, it's Eddie Lang, it's Joe Venuti, it's up there. And God bless it.

MR: Oh, God, we've got to get you on Letterman.

[Musical Interlude, "Blanche's Jump" from "Jazz Life"]