

## Jazz Backstory

### Episode 16 — Producers

JD: I think you've got to love it, and crazy comes with it. Because this isn't regular work. You know, it's not a job. You don't have real rules. There are rules but you determine your reality by how you improvise inside of those rules if you want to produce records. So it's tricky. And I guess it's not for regular people.

[Musical Interlude]

Welcome to Episode 16, our last offering in Season 2 of Jazz Backstory. Our opening mystery quote, which included the line, "I think you've got to love it, and crazy comes with it," could very well have been spoken by any number of jazz artists who have articulated a similar sentiment. In fact, it comes from Joel Dorn, who made his living as a record producer, the topic for today's episode.

When a jazz musician lands a record deal, a contract is drawn up and a producer is assigned. The musician, especially one early in their career, may or may not approve of the choice and often will have no choice in the matter. The record company fronts the money for the recording and manufacturing and while they are interested in the creative process, they are also protective of their investment. One task of a record producer is to make sure the project stays within budget and to handle any issues with unhappy artists. The actual record producing depends on the individual. If you ask a five record producers to define their role, you will hear five different answers, all decidedly non-specific.

Helen Dance was a lifelong jazz enthusiast and began producing records with Duke Ellington's small groups in the 1930s. I interviewed Helen in 1998 and my introduction of her fell short of how she defined herself.

HD: "Jazz producer" is what I like best.

MR: Jazz producer.

HD: That's what I think is most important — the music that you have contrived to bring out. Don't you think so?

MR: Yeah.

HD: That's what it is.

MR: When you use "contrive," how does that work as a producer?

HD: I don't even think of it that way. I mean you know I started very early. I think I was the first, I was the first woman producer, and I was in Chicago before *DownBeat* was born really, and so you know I was also the first contributor. But I just always looked on it from the start 'til now as you are just a channel. I don't think of producing it, I think of it being produced through you. And that's what I think is very important, because that's what is important. And of course you can be helpful, but the main thing is that you are a channel I think.

Orrin Keepnews experienced the record business from a number of angles. He began his producing career in the late 1940s and was a co-owner of a Riverside Records a respected jazz label,. Orrin was behind the glass at sessions with Thelonious Monk, Cannonball Adderley and Bill Evans.

OK: I tend to think of myself primarily at least as a producer, and that's the way I would prefer to be remembered. If I were to have a gravestone that's what it should — if it gives occupation on gravestones, that's what I want. I've been very fortunate because in this business in particular, a lot of the associations that you form, at least initially, are accidental as hell. If someone tells me that I have been helpful to this or that career that's exactly the thing that I want to hear because I have always looked on the role of the producer in a very specific way. Now one of the hardest things, and I've been at it, I'm getting perilously close to my fiftieth anniversary in this business, but I still have to pause usually when I'm asked to make some kind of definition of what it is I do, because for better or worse, I don't know about other things because I've only done this really, but jazz record producers do a little bit of everything, as there is always a shortage of personnel, and it's to me, the most important role is what I have taken to repetitiously referring to as being a catalytic agent. That I am supposed to create the circumstances

under which the artist can work most effectively. That is, I've finally got it boiled down to that one mantra and that's what I am, that's what I do. There are no — almost literally — there are no two artists who can be dealt with in the same way. There are perhaps no two record dates that can be dealt with in the same way, that's why I didn't get bored a long time ago with doing this.

During our 2002 interview Orrin spoke about his association with pianist Bill Evans. While the bulk of Bill's recordings occurred in the piano trio format, a solo composition and performance entitled "Peace Piece" was a lightning in a bottle moment, fortunately captured on tape. "Peace Piece" is based on a repeated two chord vamp in the left hand, while Bill's right hand created phrases and licks that strayed progressively further from the tonality and the sedate rhythm. During high school, my nightly fixation of this record eventually brought my father to my room to inquire, "What in the world is he doing?" Orrin produced the session and reminisced about the moment.

OK: Bill actually, he wanted to be a trio piano player and he fundamentally was. So nobody messed with him artistically too much that way.

MR: Speaking of him I wanted to get your reaction on this if I could. Let's see if I found the kind of, this is like a blindfold test.

OK: Since I don't know what you put on. Okay.

[audio interlude]

MR: I always wondered what was going on in the booth especially.

OK: Well "Peace Piece" is literally what it always was identified as being. "Peace Piece" was an improvisation, it is true that what he was setting out to do was to create an introduction to a recording of "Some Other Time," the Leonard Bernstein, Comden and Green song. He started messing around and found that gee, this was something very interesting in and of itself so that literally that was created at the record date. Also he maintained for years that he couldn't play it again because it had never been notated and it just existed as free improvisation. Towards the end though I do believe he had gotten himself to where he played it, he re-created it and played it a few times. But essentially it was what it was, a

total improvisation starting from an initial concept which was that he was trying to do something that would fit as an intro to “Some Other Time.”

MR: Right. Did you have a feeling when it was over that this is going on the album, right away?

OK: Well actually what happens is when anything gets done at a record session the only unusual thought I’m going to have is going to be gee this is lousy, this is not going to go on the album. We’re in the studio to make the album, why not start with that. And even something that’s added like that, because after all jazz is a music of improvisation is it not? So it’s not a matter of gee, isn’t that wonderful. It’s probably gee isn’t it wonderful we didn’t waste our damn time, studio time is expensive.

I had mixed feelings when Orrin casually stated that “Peace Piece” as issued was two different takes, spliced together. Splicing is an appropriate vocabulary word, literally taking a razor blade to a section of tape and joining it together. While it was the engineer who did the cutting, it was the producer and sometimes the artist, if they were even present, that made the decision where to cut.

[Musical Interlude]

Producer George Avakian played a significant role in the careers of two of the most important trumpet players in jazz: Louis Armstrong and Miles Davis. In the mid 50s, Miles was anxious to form a new band and move from Prestige, a struggling jazz label, to Columbia Records, a major player in multiple music genres. George Avakian was assigned to produce Miles and he was determined to capitalize both commercially and artistically on Miles musical talent as well as his distinctive persona.

GA: And that’s what happened. Miles was fortunate enough to get the original quintet together very quickly in September ‘55. I went to hear them for the first time in Philadelphia when he called and said, “Hey, I’ve got these terrific guys: Coltrane— and Coltrane was just a name to me, I’d never even heard him — Philly Jo Jones and Paul Chambers and Red Garland, well I knew them of course. And he did hold them together and Whittamore did do a terrific job of booking them when there were no Columbia records to back them up so that when we got the first album out “Round Midnight” — which commemorated the

performance of the song at Newport — I'd already told Miles before that release look we've got to do something different. And of course Miles was just interested in getting out and playing. And that's how the idea of Gil Evans' arrangements came about. And the title of the album, I told Miles and Gil is going to be "Miles Ahead," so give me an original composition, we'll make a DJ single of that and some of the other selections because the album as you know, is done — this is a conception that Gil had — as a complete suite, continuous. So for DJs we had to put out the separate singles. And I told the art director the album is going to be called "Miles Ahead," what can you give me as a cover that will say Miles is ahead of everybody else and Miles is moving ahead, he's miles ahead of everything. And he came up with that sailboat photograph, which he'd got from an agency which tells the story, you look past the girl and the sailboat, she's miles ahead of everybody, there's nothing but blue sky and blue ocean behind her, she's winning the race. She doesn't look like she's racing but she's attractive. And that whole promotion worked like a dream. That album sold unbelievably and established Miles all over the world. Miles hated the cover of course because it was a white girl.

MR: Well it's a pretty astute balance of artistic and commercial concerns.

GA: Well that's true you had to do that in order to stand out.

George reveals a fact about the record business that may come as a surprise. It was business as usual that after a jazz artist recorded enough music for an LP, they often would not see or hear the final product until it was completed and in the record stores. Choices about what takes to use, song order, liner notes, cover art, and even the title of the recording, were made by the producers and the suits that they reported to.

Joel Dorn, who offered the crazy quote at the top, was honest about his inability to play an instrument or even hold a tune but he liked making records. A good portion of his career was spent at Atlantic Records where he produced both jazz and popular artists. During our 2007 interview Joel spoke about the parts and the whole, the planned and the unexpected.

JD: You know I listened to some records that I made, I hadn't listened to it in like thirty years you know, ones that I really liked that I liked the production on. And somebody said to

me “well what would you do if you did that again.” I have no idea. I don’t even know how we got like a lot of it. You know a lot of it is a function of the moment. You have a singer, you have strings, you have rhythm, you have background vocals, you have horns, whatever it is. But when you work, especially on tape and you mix all of them together you have everything you want. You have the rhythm here and the vocal here and the strings here and the horns here and the background vocals here and the percussion here. But all the little sounds and all the little noises and all the little things that happen on tape, at a certain point they all combine. And then there’s like something that has nothing to do with where you put anything musically. It has to do with the overtone on this and the undertone on that and the echo here and the EQ here, and there’s that world. More so with Spector’s records than anybody in the history of records. I mean not only did you hear the piano overdubbed eleven times and all that echoed, it came back and fed on itself and all the things that he did, but then there’s the glue, there’s the world that happens when you put all these things together and the things that you don’t plan for and you couldn’t replicate. You could do it again and you might get something else good. So that’s the record. You know? The record. I like records. I like to make records. And that’s what that’s about, making a record. And so much of it is — it’s what you do but it’s what happens when you do what you do.

MR: It’s hard to recognize a hit, isn’t it?

JD: Sometimes. I could pick a hit track off of any kind of album when I was a disc jockey. Within six months of coming to Atlantic I lost my disc jockey ears. You have no idea. Listen I had a hit with Roberta Flack and Donny Hathaway that Arif Mardin and I co-produced. It was called “Where is the Love.”

MR: Oh I love that song.

JD: Until the last day before they went to the pressing plant I was trying to take it off the album. And the thing that stopped me was I was walking through the hall and one of the secretaries, Barbara Harris, she said, “I heard the test pressing on Roberta and Donny.” I said, yeah. She said, “Wow you’ve got a smash.” I said, “What is it?” She said, “What do you mean what is it?” I said, “What is it?” She said, “Where is the Love.” You know, like what are you an idiot. I said, “Really?” She said, “Yeah.” I said, “Oh okay.” I figured if the secretaries liked it, they knew more about what was good or bad than I did. I just

didn't always have those kind of ears. I knew "Killing Me Softly" was a hit. I knew that was a hit. In fact I knew it was going to win the Grammy. So, one of the few times I knew I had a hit Atlantic didn't like it. They wanted me to remix it. They didn't like the drum, that big fat, you know footed bass boom. And I said, "Well that's the record." I actually had to threaten to quit. I went to Nesuhi because Ahmet hated it. And I went to Nesuhi and I said, "Look I can't do this anymore." I said, "That's a smash, that's a number one record, that's a Grammy winner." \_

And indeed it was, winning the Grammy for Record of the Year and Best Female Vocal Performance in 1974. 23 years later I was looking for an independent record producer that might have interest in unreleased Joe Williams recordings that lived on 30 year old reel-to-reel tape, donated to the Fillius Jazz Archive by Mrs. Jillean Williams. My search led me to a small office in NY where Joel Dorn sat surrounded by audio gear. Moments after the unmistakable voice of Joe Williams burst out of the speakers, Joel leapt from his seat and yelled, "Do you know what the — you've got here" I actually did know and I also knew that I had found my producer. The CD, "Joe Williams Havin' A Good Time" was released on Hyena Records in 2005 and Joel made all those decisions I just spoke of. Happily, they were the right ones, even if he was a bit crazy.

[Musical Interlude]

Unlike Helen Dance who simply let the music channel through her, some producers like to take a very active role in shaping the final product. Having multiple choices when it comes time to mix gives them extra decisionmaking opportunities. Saxophonist Tom Scott is quite familiar with this producing approach. And it's a good bet to say that everyone has heard Tom Scott. His distinctive saxophone has been heard on hundreds of recordings, from Carole King to Steely Dan to Paul McCartney. During our 2022 interview he spoke about a producer who believed more was better, just in case.

MR: Were there sessions where you left after playing multiple solos and you didn't know what they were going to use and you might not find out what they were going to use until you were in your car listening?

TS: Every one, where I did multiple solos. I never knew what they were going to use. You've reminded me of a gentleman named Michael Masser. I can't remember whether he's still with us or not but he was a songwriter and record producer who called me one time, I didn't know him but he got my number and said, "Listen I'm producing a new young lady. I think she's a fantastic singer, I think she's going to be a big star. Her name is Whitney Houston. And I've written a bunch of songs for her and I'd like you to play on one." I said, "Fine." So I showed up to the studio. Michael was there, Whitney Houston was not, she had already laid down her vocal tracks so she didn't have to be there. And so it was a tune, it sort of reminded me, it definitely had a sort of 50s Doo-Wop kind of a feel. I mean it was a big production but basically was [scats] — that kind of a thing. So that's nice, you know, pleasant. And so I played fills behind her and Michael Masser he kept wanting, "Oh well let's do one more, do one more." So I don't know how many takes I did. It might have been over twenty. And finally I said, "Look, Michael, I don't — whatever I did, whatever the best thing I could possibly do is, you've got it there somewhere. I don't have any more to give to this thing. I'm done." And I just said, "I have to go now." So of course the record came out, it was a huge hit and I have some nice solos, things I'm very happy about.

Recording studio dynamics grow even more complicated when the all important engineer was included. Both artists and producers can make an engineer's life difficult when they stray beyond their own expertise. West coast engineer Hank Cicalo recorded everyone from Duke Ellington to the Beach Boys and regularly dealt with ill-conceived requests during sessions.

HC: Sometimes if you're editing with the producer and an artist the artist can get really crazy about I want this take and I want those four bars and it's into one of those things. We used to call them suicide missions because you knew that certain artists were always into editing. Let's take one and two and we'll put them together.



MR: Yeah once they see that that stuff is possible then they start thinking, oh okay, now I know what I can do.

HC: Exactly. See if we can have a better take on take three. “I’d like to take that second chorus, it’s really good.” “Okay.” In the old days you had, the engineers had a scissor — I can’t describe — but we would fly under it with your hand, like you’d flip it out and there would be the blades and you’d make the cut, flip the scissor back in again and make the cut and put it together.

MR: Did it make a difference — I worked in a studio for a while and the fellow had, the engineer had of course speakers in the walls in the booth but then he had a couple of Auratone like just small speakers.

HC: Yeah.

MR: He would check the mix on those things I guess because he was thinking about car radios or that kind of thing?

HC: Car radios was always the answer. I worked with producers, “Give me a mix, you put it on a cassette, I’m going to play it in my car.” That’s nuts. Is his car now the epitome of this is what it’s going to sound like? No. You’re going to make a sound for the best speakers you can. That will always work. If you’re going to try to work for a small speaker, you know my car is different than your car you know. You can’t do that. You’ve got to make a good mix, and it’s always like a radio mix. What you’re trying to do is to sell the record. So you know I never thought — occasionally a guy would say, “I want a car mix” and that’s nonsense. And I’ve also had producers who, “Give me a cassette,” he runs out in the parking lot and puts it in his car to listen to what it sounds like. I mean that used to knock me out. “I’ve got to listen, make a cassette I’m going to go out to my car and listen to it.” His car is now the epitome of what a record should sound like.

When it all works, the listeners reward the effort with their fandom and their dollars. The successful jazz pairings of Orrin Keepnews and Bill Evans, George Avakian and Miles Davis, are matched in the pop world with George Martin and The Beatles, Quincy Jones and Michael Jackson. Even when we consider all the effort and drama, it comes down to one basic thing, eloquently described by Bernie Kirsh, who for forty years was Chic Corea’s engineer and collaborator of choice.

BK: But the creative process is a process that's the most personal thing you can do. It's the nearest thing to not being in this world that you can do. I don't know if you've had the experience. I have, where the world goes away and you're just creating. And I think that's what occurs because it's coming from that place and that place is not in this world.

A nice coda to this last episode of Jazz Backstory, Season 2. My appreciation to my tech team Doug Higgins and Jason Lever, special thanks to Romy Britell for interview transcriptions and content guidance and to the late Milt Fillius, Hamilton Class of '44 whose vision made all this possible. Jazz Backstory will take a break before the next set. In the meantime, check out the full interviews of these artists and many others on the Fillius Jazz YouTube channel.

I'll see you on the flip side.