

Jazz Backstory Podcast

Episode #29 — Military Music:

Jazz Musicians in the Service, Part 1

[audio introduction]

Thanks for tuning into Jazz Backstory, Episode 29. I am Monk Rowe, your host and Director of the Fillius Jazz Archive at Hamilton College. After four episodes about jazz and swing band leaders we are going to take an about face and focus on a topic that seemingly has little to do with jazz or music in general.

A recent Facebook photo of saxophonist Johnny Hodges soaking up the sun on a beach got me thinking. For many years I had misconceptions about the lives of jazz musicians, especially those who lived and performed in the 1930s and '40s . My fantasy had these jazz cats playing every night in hip clubs and concert halls, traveling in style to the next gig and being paid good bread for recording LPs that they would then autograph for faithful fans. A Mr. Moses Williams, who posted the Hodges photo and seconded my naiveté , describing this misconception as “allness,” as in our assumption that playing jazz was “all” these musicians did. Johnny Hodges at a beach? Really? In my mind, I never considered that they might take a vacation or deal with the mundane concerns of paying a mortgage, sending the kids to college or sustaining any type of relationship. And who could imagine that a player of jazz would be worried about the military draft?

Which brings us to our Episode 29 title: Military Music, Jazz Musicians in the Service.

In the early years of our oral history project we sought out musicians born in the early decades of the 20th century, thus eligible for the draft as World War II became a global conflict. Here's an excerpt from an essay by Jason Dawsey Ph.D., written for the World War II Museum in New Orleans. I am replacing the subject's name with “the private.” until the end of the essay.

And I quote:

In August 1942 the private was conscripted into the United States Army. Training required him to relocate to Camp Haan, an 8,000-acre base in Riverside, California where the private qualified as a sharpshooter. The private then departed for the European theater of operations aboard the troopship *SS George Washington*, a vessel that had been transporting American service members to Britain. He never had the chance to touch British soil, before heading on to France. He stepped foot on Omaha Beach three months after the bloodshed and carnage of D-Day. As a replacement soldier, he was to join General George Patton's 3rd Army. The private knew that, as a sharpshooter, real combat was not far away. In September 1944, in a place in north-central France called the “Mudhole,” with his thoughts turning to battle, everything changed. When a group of

women from the Red Cross visited the site, entertainment was needed. The private responded to a call for a piano player. He impressed the commander of the 17th Battalion, Colonel Leslie Brown, who selected him and two others to stay. He and the other two GIs would entertain the troops. “I was so lucky that that happened,” Private Dave Brubeck stated. “I remained just behind the frontline for the rest of the war.” End quote.

Imagine how the world of music could have been altered if Dave Brubeck had been sent to the front lines. Jazz musicians were often a square peg (well a hip square peg) in a round hole when it came to the service. But they were not excused and the Selective Service was not deterred by reluctant draftees, especially during a global conflict. Pianist Jay “Hootie” McShann shared his World War II era draft story during our 1996 interview:

MR: Did you have to do the service? Army service?

JM: Oh, yes, yes. Well that’s really what broke up the big band. Yeah I fooled around and got delinquent you know. What I wanted to do I figured I says while we’re on the road traveling, so I’ll either go in when we get back to New York I’ll go in from New York, or either go in when we get to coast, the west coast. And so I had wrote them and told them to send my papers to New York and I would take my exam there. So they missed me in New York, then by the time I got to the west coast I wrote them back again and asked them to send my affairs. And the papers came about a day or two after I had left the west coast coming back this way. So they caught up with me in Kansas City, and they took me off the bandstand and took me off to Leavenworth.

MR: They don’t fool around with that, did they?

JM: No they didn’t fool around. The guy told me he says, he was real nice at first, we took intermission you know, and we took intermission and he says, “We’ve got some important business we’ve got to talk to you” and there’s two of them. They says, “We don’t want to upset you or nothing, but we’ve got — here are these papers we’ve got. Read these papers. These papers got two red I’s on them,” he says, “and that means Immediate Induction.” So when I read it I see, they said, “This means we’ve got to take you back with us tonight to Leavenworth” which was about 30 miles from Kansas City. So luckily, George Salsbury, a piano player was there in the dressing room so I called George over, so George finished the gig that night for me. And I went on with them to Leavenworth. And the next morning when a guy looked at my papers he says, “You’re in the Army.” He says, “Welcome.” I said, “I hope you don’t mean that.” He said, “Yes I do.” He says, “There it is.” He said, “Immediate Induction.”

A third pianist, John Bunch, avoided being drafted in the only surefire way, by enlisting. John’s piano skills did not keep him out of combat as Dave Brubeck’s did.

JB: Well I always was fascinated by airplanes when I was a little kid growing up, and my father had been in World War I and he was in the infantry. And he suffered terrible. I

mean he never was wounded but he had terrible experiences in World War I in the mud. As he says he slept in the mud, and I thought, oh, I don't want to do that. If I have to go — in those days you had to, you know, young men had to go in the service, you had no choice. So I thought well, I love airplanes so I'll volunteer to be in the Air Force. So I was able to work my way up to become a flying officer you know in the Air Force, and flew missions over Germany as it turned out. And on the seventeenth mission I got shot down over Germany, deep into Germany, near Leipzig, and was taken prisoner. It was a scary, very frightening situation, the whole thing. All the missions were too you know. It was terrible. I was lucky to live through it. You know my pilot and my navigator were killed that day, the day I got shot down. You know the plane blew up and — a terrible thing. And then I went into a prison camp with other people who had had the same experiences or worse even some. So we were all in it together. We were young. I was 21 or 22, and somehow we— and we didn't get much to eat and we had a lot of misery in that prison camp, but we somehow pulled through. And I was one of the lucky ones. Some people died there, some people were killed trying to escape, so it was a pretty bad situation but anyhow we, through the grace of God, I made it.

John Bunch performed at Hamilton College, home of the Fillius Jazz Archive, in 2008. A soft spoken, unassuming gentleman, I had a difficult time picturing him flying combat missions in a B17 and surviving an extended period in a German prison camp.

Musicians who had already established reputations were often assigned stateside duties, as the military employed their talents for morale purposes. Drummer Louie Bellson shares his experience:

LB: But it was a great experience joining Benny's band.

MR: And this was what year, around?

LB: That had to be around '42, '42 I think, 1942, yeah.

MR: Amazing. And you probably toured around the country quite a bit with him?

LB: Yeah I did just under a year with Benny and then Uncle Sam got me. But I was very fortunate. They looked at my credentials, having worked with Benny Goodman. I was supposed to go to March Field with Ziggy Elman's band in California. Instead they shipped me to Washington, D.C. with an excellent band, a big orchestra, a concert band, a marching band, a big jazz band, small combos, so I actually did a lot of playing when I was in the service for three years. And we were stationed at Walter Reed Hospital and we had to play for all those amputees who came back from the war. And the best medicine they could have was to hear American jazz — or any kind of music — it could be symphonic music, chamber music, whatever. And I played more drum solos for those guys than I ever did back in civilian life.

Vibraphonist and drummer Terry Gibbs, formerly Julius Gubenko, discovered that his extroverted personality did not fall into step with military decorum. Again, music came to the rescue.

TG: Want me to tell you my first experiences in the Army?

MR: Yeah.

TG: You know when you first go in they send you to I think Fort Dix, the big camp where before they send you out to wherever you're going to go, they get thousands of guys there and all you do is walk around picking up cigarette butts. They have to kill time until they find a place where you're going to go. And this one guy was a PFC, kept picking on this guy who at that time I thought was an old guy, because I was 18 and he was 39. I thought he was old. Now he could be my grandson. I thought he was old. And so he kept picking at him. And so I said, "Hey listen, why don't you give the rest of us something to do, you know, he's an older guy here." He takes me out and he says, "What's your name?" I thought he was going to make me a sergeant, what do you mean. So I told him Private Julius Gubenko." Four o'clock in the morning, that guy came in, "Gubenko?" I said, "Yeah." "You're on K.P." He said, "I know you have to do that," and you serve thousands of guys. And then whenever you serve them then you go home usually. "Gubenko, you guys stay and you have to clean out the pots and pans." I'm talking about funky pots and pans. So I did that and I went back to bed about two o'clock in the morning. Four o'clock in the morning, again, the same guy woke me up for K.P. and I went through the same thing. And the next night he did it again. And now I knew what he was doing, because of what I did and I said, "Listen, why don't we go outside and fight and get this over with?" No fighting, you do K.P. He wouldn't fight me and he had me do K.P. for five days until I didn't say a word. I mean it taught me something. Now the infiltration course is where they have barbed wire about this high and you have to crawl underneath through mud with the thing exploding. And this is World War II where there is no games. We had to beat Hitler and his gang, where they actually shot real bullets overhead, real bullets. Because if you sit up you can get hurt, and killed, but if you did it overseas you can kill everybody else because — so that was the training. So I did that and I was ready to go overseas and they don't tell you anything, Private Gubenko, once again, they ship me to Dallas, Texas, they put together a band to make music, the Army picks it. And they need a percussion player. So I would be up playing drums in the band, which I wanted to do, with 30 strings and all, a big thing, and I'd play some vibes once in a while too, because they had a bunch of drummers. And I wound up writing a lot of arrangements, doing the whole thing. Never could get a rating, because also in those days we used to listen to Woody Herman's band on the radio and Davy Tough was playing drums and when Davy would finish the song it would be cut off and he goes [scats] he did some extra beats. So every time in the band, boy I was hip you know. He'd cut us off and I'd go [scats]. He says, "Hey what are you doing, I gave you a cut off." I says, "Yeah, but Davy Tough." He says, "I don't care about Davy Tough or Woody Herman.

And I never could get — when I got discharged, like eighty years later, I was finally a corporal. I finally kept my mouth shut. If you're not the band leader, don't say anything. But it took a while.

MR: I have a feeling you still have to get the last word in.

Up until 1948, the United States military was strictly segregated. The racial disparity in society as a whole was magnified in the military, where one white officer had complete control over a company of black draftees. Clark Terry was assigned to Camp Robert Smalls, bordering Lake Michigan in Illinois. Following is an excerpt from our 1995 session with Clark Terry and vocalist Joe Williams:

CT: Well you know that's when we had two Navys, you know, we had the white Navy and the black Navy. Remember that?

JW: No I don't.

CT: Well our camp was Camp Robert Smalls, and all of the black enlisted men in the Naval services were relegated to this camp. And there were six other camps, Caucasian camps you know, so we were all there in our little space you know, in our little camp, Camp Robert Smalls, and we had a commander who was a banjo player, who was the most notorious banjo player of that era, by the name of Eddie Peabody. And he had the grand idea that since he was there surrounded by all these black musicians that it would be a good idea to start a minstrel. So he wanted us to —

JW: He was going to start a minstrel?

CT: Yeah. He wanted to start a minstrel. And we rebelled, almost to the point where we were going to be charged with treason.

JW: Treason — or mutiny.

CT: Or mutiny or whatever. He wanted us to do all this you know, with the white gloves and the big bow tie.

JW: And next came black face.

CT: Yeah. And we refused to do that.

JW: Eddie Cantor and the guys were still doing Jolson and that kind of thing.

CT: We had one commander who literally hated black people. He came through the barracks every night to make sure that everything was in order. Anything that was out of order was referred to as a "holiday." If there was a speck on the window he'd say, "Get that holiday off of there." If there was dust on the floor, that's a holiday. If your boots weren't laced right, it was a holiday. So he'd come through looking for holidays. And any little thing that would go wrong, in the middle of the night, they'd say, "all right hit the deck." —

JW: How we won the war.

CT: The Battle of Great Lakes. Sometimes he would make us go out in the middle of the night to march just for the heck of it because it was his way of getting back at us. And we had figured up a little way to escape. Because we would walk to the end of the grid iron and

there was a little hole we cut in the fence, so every trip around, one or two would disappear and go up to Waukegan.

JW: Oh, my God.

CT: And have a great time. But by the time he was finished marching us around he'd end up with maybe 16 troops or 18, you know, out of the whole barracks.

JW: I think you should write that story sometime, man. I mean — Daddy what did you do in the war, you understand? Yeah I fought prejudice.

CT: Fought the Battle of the Great Lakes.

JW: The Battle of the Great Lakes.

Ladies and gents, it's jazz vocabulary time and our terms today are as much about the military as they are jazz. The K.P. duty Terry Gibbs experienced stood for "Kitchen Patrol" and it was grungiest work imaginable. And later in the podcast we'll hear the term "boy singer." Most big bands designated their male vocalist as a "boy singer" and their female vocalist as the "chirper" or "chickadee." Lastly, Joe Williams mentions "black face" in minstrel shows, when white entertainers darkened their faces with burnt cork.

[audio interlude]

World War II ended in stages, first in Europe, then in Japan with the dropping of the first atomic bombs on August 6, 1945. Two jazz personalities share their feelings about the historic event. First we hear from jazz producer Orrin Keepnews.

MR: Let me go backwards just a little bit. You were in the South Pacific?

OK: I was on Guam. I was a navigator radar operator on B-29s. I did a lot of dropping of bombs on Japan, which I'm resolutely not proud of for the rest of my life, so—

MR: At that time you were 23?

OK: 22 maybe, around in there.

MR: How did you feel about it at the time? Do you recall?

OK: At the time you didn't feel about it. There is a — I mean I'm no great expert on it but there were two years in my life where I was involved in armed conflict and I think that one of the ways in which some of us emotionally survive was a form of anesthetizing yourself. You did not think about what you were doing. You did not — I mean I don't think, unfortunately at the end of the war, after the war was over, I flew a couple of missions where we were taking a batch of generals up to evaluate what had been done to Tokyo. So we flew in the daytime at pretty low levels over Tokyo, which is something I had never done before, and I was able to see — see Tokyo, I'll take a lot of credit for the fact that Tokyo was a modern city that is almost entirely a post-war city, it looked to me to be about fifty percent burned out, Let me put it that way. And that was the first time, the shock of that hit me. Not to turn this into too much of a war memoir but basically B-29 flights were — we didn't do very much daytime formation bombing which involved

demolition bombs. We normally did night flights where you just flew in a single file so basically you were following at a decent interval the plane ahead of you and we were dropping incendiary bombs so that what you did was it was a very lazy form of bombing, you just dropped on the fires that were in front of you. And if the first guy in line had been way off target, we all were because nobody did anything else but that. But the whole point there was that you could be very detached. You didn't have to force yourself to think that you really were causing fires to happen in a large metropolitan city that was there under you. And you could block that out pretty good because hey, you had no alternative. This is what you were doing and this is what you were doing in the great war and I'm not saying — I've long since given up figuring out whether this was in many respects a good or a bad thing. However, at this time of year as we get around the middle of August every year I am forced to think that in my personal opinion the damn atom bomb never should have been dropped, and let's not get into the aesthetics or morality of that, but you have led me to this point in time so I make that statement. But you just, you blot it out, the implications of what you were doing, I think because it was pretty necessary. But let's get back to jazz.

George Wein, who eventually became a music impresario and founder of the Newport Jazz Festival, was stationed in France. In August of 1945, he waited for deployment to combat duty in Japan.

GW: I hated every minute I was in the Army. And when I got out, I mean when they dropped the bomb, the atomic bomb, which has since become such a controversial thing, I remember I was in Marseille and I sat down on a dirt road, it was a camp you know, and started to cry with relief. I was going home. So when I hear all the controversy about the atomic bomb, I can never forget my feeling when we dropped that bomb and I knew we were going home. I going to be in— But I was supposed to take a boat and be involved in the invasion to Japan. Because we were in a staging area in Marseille waiting to go through the Panama Canal all the way to Japan. And I never left. And I went home. So that was an interesting part of my life.

MR: I bet you weren't alone in that feeling too.

GW: Oh I'm sure everybody did. But the thing I learned in the Army that was, hey, you were only yourself. You were not Dr. Wein's son. You were not a nice Jewish kid from a middle class family. Economics, background, nothing meant anything except you, yourself. And you had to compete with the other guy. Now the other guy might have been a brilliant guy from Harvard, he might have been some poor guy from the mountains in Kentucky, he might have been a tough mug from the factories somewhere in Detroit. You had to be equal with them. You had nothing going for you except yourself, and you learned how to handle yourself. And that has been a benefit to me all of my life. And I'm very happy I went through that. I would never ask anybody to go through it again because

it's — Army life is not any fun you know. I mean it's terrible. But if you go through it, it's worth it.

MR: A lot of the musicians I've talked to have been fortunate that they were musicians, much like yourself.

GW: So I never had the benefit of being in a musical outfit. But because we played, we always found guys that played. On every camp that we went to there were guys that played. Even on the boat coming home there was a group of musicians on all the trip home, which in those days took eight or nine days on the ocean, ten days, you know they weren't fast ships. We'd play music all the time. So it was always a saving grace for me.

Pianist and trumpeter Joe Bushkin, small in stature like Terry Gibbs, had a similar pugnacious personality. He engaged in two immediate tasks when the end of the war was announced.

MR: Was the end of the war a surprise or was it —

JB: Yeah it was quite a surprise because we were in the trans and flyers barracks and the M.P.s drove up around three or four in the morning and said, "Hey guys, the war is over." And I had stashed a half a gallon of pure alcohol, which I got from an aircraft carrier, which you could mix with the little cans of grapefruit juice, and I mixed a drink for us. And the next move is I went over and started to choke an accordion player until I could kill him. It took four or five guys to get me off of him.

MR: You weren't fond of accordions?

JB: The guy who played the accordion on the show that Peter Lind Hayes put together, he was terrible. He couldn't get through "Melancholy Baby." I used to play the trumpet with one hand and the keyboard with my left hand to play the right chords, or something similar to the right chords.

MR: So you figured now that the war's over I can let this guy have it.

JB: Oh I've got to get rid of him.

[audio interlude]

Born in 1915, trumpeter Bobby Johnson was just old enough to avoid the World War II era draft. He vividly remembers where he was and what he was doing when the announcement came.

MR: I understand you were singing on the radio when a very important announcement was made in 1945?

BJ: Well I swore I'd never talk about it because people, you know people may say that — right now — I think about it, the night, and I could tell you, the night that World War II ended. It was ABC. And there were a lot of things happening. We were in the Hotel Lincoln. As you know, the Hotel Lincoln was the only one in New York that used black bands. Our band and Count Basie. But we knew that there was something happening and we were in a rush to get back to the hotel because we got back and we took our seats and

the song that I sang — I wasn't really the boy singer with Erskine, but I did my parts you know. And we were singing [sings] "Saturday night is the loneliest night in the week." And all of a sudden a guy came out and waved his hand and he said, "Ladies and Gentlemen, World War II has ended."

MR: Wow.

BJ: That hit us. And you know what day — that is what changed the world. This was at the Blue Room at the Hotel Lincoln, the night World War II was over, and man, you've never seen people — you've seen that famous photo of the sailor kissing the girl and all of that kind of stuff was happening. And then sadly to say, that was the beginning of the end of the big band era. That was the beginning of the end of the era because when television came in the early '50s, that was the end of it. But I still do all right, I can't kick. I have a gig tomorrow night.

I just love that. Mr. Johnson was 83 years old at the time of this interview, and confined to a wheelchair, but all was well because he had a gig the next night.

Our military music focus will continue in episode 30 with anecdotes from musicians involved in the Korean and Vietnam conflicts. These full interviews are accessible on the Fillius Jazz YouTube channel, become a subscriber. S

I'll see you on the flip side.

[audio conclusion]