

# **Jazz Backstory Podcast**

## **Episode #30 — Military Music: Jazz Musicians in the Service, Part 2**

[audio introduction]

Welcome to Jazz Backstory, Episode 30, Military Music part 2. It was not planned, but the 80th anniversary of D Day took place during the time when we assembled the episodes related to musicians in the service. Watching, once again, the grainy black and white film of that historic event reminded me of the incredible sacrifice involved. It's sobering to realize that America is rarely not involved in armed conflict somewhere in the world. In this episode, we are shifting our focus from World War II to America's next major conflicts. The majority of musicians drafted into the service during times of conflict were able to make use of their talents and hold an instrument in their hands instead of a rifle. Drummer Jake Hanna points out the obvious reason, besides the fact that musicians were rarely molded into effective soldiers.

MR: At what age were you inclined to think, hey maybe I can make a living as a drummer?

JH: Well I never did anything else. So I never thought of it, never thought of it. Just loved it. You know I never thought of ever doing anything else you know. Ever. I just loved it. When I went in the service, I figured well I'll go in, I'll be a gunner, you know. But they eliminated them gunners, in the '50s, they eliminated it, everything was electronic. And they came up with the jets then, jets were invented. So they wouldn't let me handle a gun anyway, you know. But if you played a musical instrument they put you right in band play, and if you were a doctor or in medicine they pulled you right into that area and gave you a commission. You can't train a musician in four years. You just take somebody off the street and say all right you're in the service? Oh, you're going to be — I need two drummers over here — forget it, you can't train a guy you see? Who plays the drums? You do? Over here. A doctor? We can't train a doctor in four years. So you're automatically in when you go in. That's automatically what you do. Most people, they can train you. Infantry, everybody can shoot a gun.

MR: That's true. I never even thought of it that way.

JH: No they have to have specialists, and you've got to go right away. They can train guys in dots and dashes and radio people, they can get that done in six months you know. But not a musician. Play a march and then play a little symphony and then play a little dance job and then play a show. In fact most musicians can't do all that you know, really.

MR: That's true.

Often referred to as the "forgotten war," a trip to the Korean conflict was the concern for young men in the early 1950s. Junior Mance and Cannonball Adderley, two of my favorite artists, were in uniform during that time period. Picture if you will, Junior Mance, walking guard duty. A jazz pianist who had already recorded with major artists, Junior pondered his impending deployment:

JM: I couldn't get into the Army band because I didn't play a marching instrument. You know back then to get into the Army band you had to play a marching instrument. So I was slated to go to Korea you know. So the basic training you know, they give you a rifle, an empty rifle, and they teach you how to walk guard duty. So the post they assigned me was around the service club. And while I'm walking around it, I hear this great music. I said wow, some fantastic records. And I would walk slow every time I got past the time I got near where the music was coming from. I'd walk very slowly. So anyway, when my rest period came I ran back to the service club, and when I ran inside I looked and there is this big band sitting on the stage with this roly poly guy leading it, playing alto. I stopped and I was frozen. I listened and I just ran up to the stage then and I listened to a couple of tunes. And something I'd never do is ask to sit in. I always wait to be asked you know. But then I couldn't hold back. I says, "Hey man, could I sit in the band?" So the piano player, I was standing near him and he heard me. So he reaches down off the stage and pulls me up and says, "Hey yeah man, play." And but I'm sitting there, you know I'm walking guard duty with combat boots, helmet, and so Cannonball's giving me like such a look of disdain, I've never seen in my life, like wow, who is this cat? And the rest of the guys in the band are looking like, "Huh?" So Cannonball asked, he says, "What do you want to play?" I says, "Well play anything out of your book." And by saying it like that, you know, that kind of caught him. It kind of surprised him, like maybe the guy is a musician. So they called an easy tune, an easy bebop tune with blues changes. They played the head and then they gave me the first solo. Cannonball says, "All right you got it." I said what did he say that for, you know I haven't been near a piano in six weeks you know. I just played and I stretched out and he started, "Yeah man, go ahead, play some more." And I looked, and I happened to look up at the rest of the band and I see heads going like that. And after a while they say, "Yeah, yeah man, go ahead, go ahead." I must have made about nine choruses. Then the band came in and I read the charts and all. And so after that was over, Cannonball comes over to the piano and says, "Yeah man, that's great," he says, "what's your name?" I say, "Junior Mance." And Sonny Stitt was one of his heroes man, and I had worked with Sonny and Gene before I got drafted. Sonny Stitt

and Gene Ammons. So he says, he laughs, he says, "If you're Junior Mance what are you doing here in those clothes?" I said, "What are you doing here?" So we had a big laugh about it and he says, "Are you coming to the band?" I said, "No, they won't let me because I don't play a marching instrument." So I finished the night, that happened to be their last set that last hour. So the next day was the day that I'm on the infiltration course, you know what the infiltration course is, that's when you're out in training and they shoot machine gun bullets three feet above the ground. The guns are fixed so that they can't do that you know. And usually it's on dry ground. Well this day they chose to take hoses and make it real muddy. And you don't stand up, you got to crawl. So when we got to the end of the infiltration course I saw this jeep. And as I got closer I says, "That's Cannonball." You know and he goes up to the First Sergeant and hands him a slip of paper and the First Sergeant just looks at it and says, "Okay, Mance, take off. They want you at headquarters." So I jumped in the jeep with Cannonball, and as soon as we got out of earshot, he says, "Okay now listen carefully." He says, "These orders are phony." I says, "Oh, Cannonball you know I didn't come out here to go to jail. I was late getting there anyway because I was on the road with you." He says, "Trust me." I said, what choice have I got. So then he says, "We're going back to the barracks and I want the band director to hear you," he says, "maybe we can do something, pull some kind of strings to get you in the band." I says, "Oh great, well I'm for that." So we went back, and the band director didn't know about anything but marches. He was like a career soldier anyway, getting out soon fortunately, and all he knew was marches. He didn't know anything about jazz. So Cannonball had stacked the deck. When we got back to the barracks, I didn't know he had told the guys, "Now when Junior starts playing, whoop it up, you know, snap your fingers, make it look like that he's good." So I got back and the band director says oh the usual things like your name and how long you been in the Army and so forth. He says, "Well play something. Let me hear you play something." I said, "What should I play?" He says, "Play anything, anything." So I just started playing some blues, you know, at a tempo like that. And sure enough the guys jumped in. And so he's standing there you know like a real soldier, So I went through about two or three songs, so he gave me one of these back-handed compliments I call them, he says, "Well you must be good, they think you are." Thanks a lot. So then Cannonball forgot to brief me on the important question: "What's your other instrument?" I said, "I'm sorry I only play piano." He says, "Oh, that presents a problem." So back to training I went, but the guy did make arrangements with my Sergeant to let me get off like about three nights a week that they played the service club, to go and play that. And I did. So one night I came, when I reported to the service club to play with the guys, they were looking a little bit

downhearted because the drummer had gotten orders to ship to Germany. And he was a good drummer, they hated to lose a good drummer, but also he was the Company Clerk, which they do all the administrative work, it's the next thing out of the First Sergeant. And he usually knows everything, and I found out later why they wanted to company clerk, so that they could really be tight with, because he would warn them of impending inspections or like that you know. So I asked Cannonball I said, "Well that's a full time job, isn't it?" He said, "Yeah." I said, "Well how do you do that?" He says, "Well first you have to know how to type." I said, "I can type, I learned how to type in high school." Right away you could see light bulbs lighting up. So that's how I got in. And you know it's something I'll never know, the Basic Training outfit that I was training with was sent to Korea and I only met four guys that came back out of this group. I understand that our whole company was absorbed into the 24th Infantry Division, which got caught in a hell of an ambush over there. And I wonder, you know, like I sort of think that Cannonball might have saved my life. If it weren't for him I might not be here.

Junior Mance, Company Clerk by day, jazz pianist by night. After military service, Junior's musical associations included work with Dizzy Gillespie, Joe Williams, and Dinah Washington. He eventually led his own trios for many productive years. To hear Junior tell a fascinating childhood story, check out Episode 2 of our podcast.

[audio interlude]

Saxophonist Frank Foster, in a similar predicament as Junior Mance, panicked and went AWOL, Absent Without Leave. He shared his Korean War story during our 1998 interview:

FF: I trained Basic Training in an all-black company that was part of an all-black battalion. But as soon as I got to Japan and Korea, it was all over, it was totally integrated. I was in Japan for a very short while, and only taking school training to be a clerk typist. This was to stay out of the war zone. So after that I was shipped to the war zone, and I was in a service company of an infantry regiment for a few months and then I went and auditioned for the division band and got in the division band. And there was quite a bit of playing, so I was able to stay up on the instrument.

MR: Great. That was early in the war, wasn't it? Fifty—

FF: '52. Yes. In '51 I was drafted into the Army and most of '51 was spent in the California area, San Francisco. I went AWOL for over a month over Thanksgiving and Christmas because I was afraid that after I finished Basic Training, the idea of going, actually into

the war as an infantry rifleman, you know that just scared me to death. So I said well I'm going to stay out here and live a little. And there was no timetable as to when I was going to turn myself in, but there was a lady that I was friendly with who persuaded me to turn myself in. She said, "Please, turn yourself in, don't get caught. If they catch you out here, I'll never see you again." That was the rationale she used on me. And certain other people who professed to be in the know said, "Turn yourself in to the chaplain, he'll understand." So after I went back to turn myself in I went straight to the chaplain and I told him my story. And he said, "Well son, you're a musician is that right?" "Yeah." "Well what kind of music do you play?" And why did I tell him I played jazz? He said, "Oh that's too bad, you know that jazz, that's not the music you should be playing. It's all right if you play church music, you know, religious music, but" — and these are his exact words and this is the title of one of my chapters — "You'll have to give up that jazz, son." And that's the title of Chapter 7 in my book.

MR: All right.

FF: So I was under a military court martial and I was sentenced to a month in the stockade, and I spent five days in the stockade, after which I was shipped to the Far East. And I landed in Japan and a few weeks later I was sent to Korea, and the fighting was going on heavy, and this was early 1952 in March, March 9th was the exact day I landed in Korea, and it was a horrible looking day and I'll never forget that. But I spent 13 months and 13 days in Korea.

MR: You have a pretty good memory for significant dates.

FF: Yeah I can't remember where I was yesterday but this I remember. And after being released and shipped back to the United States, I came back to Detroit, now this was May of 1953. My first day in town, I don't have any civilian clothes, I'm walking around in my Army uniform, I ran into an old friend who said, "Count Basie is looking for you." I said, "Count Basie's looking for me? Nobody knows I'm here." He said, "Count Basie's looking for you, you'd better go over to the—" I forget what the ballroom, the Graystone Ballroom or something like that. The Basie band was actually appearing that night. So I went over there and surely enough, Lockjaw Davis was planning to leave and Ernie Wilkins and Jimmy Wilkins, who were in the band at the time, and they, along with Billy Eckstine had recommended me for the band but they didn't know where I was at the time. So I showed up.

MR: That is really wild.

FF: The right place at the right time and three months later I was in the Count Basie Orchestra, July 27, 1953.

Frank Foster fashioned a robust career in jazz as a player, composer and leader of his Loud Minority Big Band and the Count Basie Orchestra after Basie passed in 1984. Our jazz oral history project began in 1995 and I maintain a lengthy “try to get with this musician list” regarding future interviews. There are two other sobering lists, one of musicians who have passed away since we interviewed them and a second list I title “regrets,” the artists who passed away before our effort began. The virtuoso baritone saxophonist Pepper Adams (1930-1986) is on that list. I am currently reading *Pepper Adams: Saxophone Trailblazer* by Gary Carner. Mr. Carner has skillfully captured the saxophonist’s life story, including his Korean War experience, a period that Pepper tried to forget. What he did share is spot on for this podcast episode. The following is a paraphrased excerpt from the book.

Traveling nearly every day for the next six months, Adams performed in about 250 shows for U.S. troops and their allies. Platoon member Al Gould said, “Where there were fifty men or more, we’d put on a show.” The roads that the convoy navigated were unpaved and rocky, producing clouds of dust and only allowing them to plod along at a top speed of 15 miles an hour. The slow pace during the day would enable soldiers to observe the rugged terrain, including marijuana that was growing near the road. Someone would yell, “Pot!” the convoy would screech to a halt and the excited soldiers would jump out. They rarely had a chance to bathe, only occasionally having access to cold showers when asked to do impromptu performances for officers at the front line. Danger lurked everywhere. Adams had the horrifying experience of witnessing a gunner, carrying a box of ammunition and wearing a bandolier around his torso, suffer a direct hit and explode. Korea was such a ghastly experience that Pepper chose not to discuss it, though he did acknowledge that he was fortunate to survive. “Going over on a troopship jammed to the gills, and then coming back on a troopship and having it half full, made me realize something about a casualty rate.” Every so often Pepper was able to break away from his squadron. “A couple of times I hitched along the front line, carrying a carbine in one hand and my alto in the other, to visit Frank Foster,” said Adams. “Frank was in the Seventh Military Division Band. We sure had some good sessions.” End quote.

Two East Coast-based saxophonists meet up along the front lines in Korea to jam. You can’t make these things up.

[audio interlude]

Except for the willing and patriotic volunteers, young men have always been particularly concerned about the draft during times of war. In 1969 the Vietnam conflict was escalating and a draft lottery based on birth dates was instituted. Broadcast on live television, it was like a bingo game from hell. I well remember standing shoulder to shoulder in a crowd of fellow music students, breathlessly waiting for the birth dates to be read off those ominous looking ping pong balls. I was lucky, some of my buddies were not. My housemate, pianist, Onaje Allan Gumbs was in that crowd:

OG: Because what happened is that of course in the time that we were graduating from Fredonia was in the middle of the Vietnam war. And they had a lottery system. And my number was 49. My number was up. So I was going to Vietnam. And I went through the whole thing of going down and the whole draft thing and taking the test, and couldn't bring myself to lie or do stuff that —

MR: Yeah, right.

OG: And of course you know they were ready to ship me off. But I decided I wasn't going. And I wasn't going to flee to Canada. So the only thing I had at my disposal was to plead a conscientious objector. And I used my music as my religion. Because that would be religious reasons. And I went through different anecdotes, going back to in high school when I was with Jerry Gonzalez, that Latin band, there was always fights. And I'd never get in the middle of it because I valued their friendship, so it was always hard for me to draw sides and take sides. And I just did like this whole paper, it was like a thesis, about my feelings about war and feelings about killing people. And I had to have some people to write affidavits to support my feelings. And Dr. Billy Taylor was one of the people that wrote a letter. And at that time I didn't realize it, I found out maybe ten years ago, my mother had a trunk with some of my stuff in it, and actually he is the reason I chose the name Onaje. Because I found the name in a book of African names as "the sensitive one." And Billy wrote in print that Allan is a very sensitive person. And he went on to say, "He will be of no use to you." You know I guess his thing was he'll sabotage a mission, because the man is so against killing people that you'll have a hard time so you really don't want him. And I did it fair and square. I mean I went up there, my father went with me, he is a World War II vet, the whole nine yards. But he supported the fact that I didn't want to go and why I didn't want to go, and he stood by me. And at one point they asked me, if someone harms your mother, would you retaliate? And I broke down and started crying. And I said no. And I remember I just couldn't contain myself, I just started to cry and cry and cry. I wanted them to know that I was sincere. So the only difference was the fact that instead of waiting two weeks, I found out that night that I got it. Okay? So I was given the 4F — no actually given — no the 4F classification, and I'm waiting to find out

what this manager is going to do to keep me out of going, now that I got this deferment. Because usually you have to go work someplace that's so far away from your house you wish you had gone in the Army you know. And that's why make it very uncomfortable for you. You're usually working like in a mental institution or something like that. So around that time a friend of mine named Sabu, a great bass player named Sabu Adeola, who lived in Buffalo, who I met in my senior year at Fredonia, because one of the fellow students took me to Buffalo. So I met some musicians during that time and he called me and said we have a program, we'd like you to teach, it's a Model Cities program. And it turned out that this program fit the requirements of a CO deferment. Because it had to be a nonprofit organization, more than fifty miles away from your home base. Voila. So I started working right away. I didn't wait for them to assign me, I just started working. And they wrote the person who was in charge, Sabu signed a form, I had to send away to show what I was making and all that kind of stuff. So about six months later I get reclassified. So I'm relieved of my CO classification, but in other words you'll never be called.

In 1971, Onaje was a senior at SUNY Fredonia, I was one year behind. The Buddy Rich Orchestra came to the school for a concert in our large hall. Buddy's pianist fell ill and someone tipped him to the fact that the Fredonia music department had an outstanding jazz pianist. In a classic fairy tale scenario, Onaje sat in and played chorus after chorus on the first tune, encouraged enthusiastically by Mr. Rich and the band. After the partisan audience calmed down, Buddy, over the mic said, "Hey, you want a gig?" All of us jazz guys, who had dreamt of this exact scenario for ourselves, yelled variations on "Yeah, go for it, hit the road man!" A self-described sensitive person, Onaje was also wise beyond his years. He passed on the opportunity. He realized his temperament and Buddy Rich's were not a match made in musical heaven. Onaje went on to work with Woody Shaw, Nat Adderley and the Thad Jones-Mel Lewis Orchestra and recorded as a leader on multiple CDs. He passed away in April 2020, a victim of complications from Covid. In 2022, De Kruif Place in the Bronx was co-named Onaje Allan Gumbs Way.

[audio interlude]

Music provided an effective morale builder for soldiers fighting overseas. As we have heard, it was most often provided by talented fellow soldiers. Professional entertainers who were well past military age were also engaged to undertake tours, raising the spirits of homesick soldiers. Comedian and actor Bob Hope made a tradition of it, touring Vietnam nine separate times, often



accompanied by Les Brown and His Band of Renown. Hal Espinosa was in the trumpet section and shared his story during our 2024 interview.

HE: You know I only auditioned twice in my life. One was to get the scholarship at Arizona State and the other is when I got drafted after I graduated from Arizona State I was drafted in the Army. And after the six month — I mean six weeks of Basic Training then they'd send you to Advanced Training — I think that's what they called it. And I asked if I could audition for the band. So they sent me to the band, and there's this little cornet player. He had — well I was 25 then I think — 24 or 25 or no, 24. 23 or 24. Anyway this guy took me in and he looked like he had to be 55 or 60 years old, you know some wrinkled faces and sergeant, you know the whole thing. Just the nicest old guy. He had me play a couple of scales and read a simple little line. And he said, "Okay, you're in." So I spent my two years at Fort Ord right outside of Monterey, California, which is a beautiful area, so I never had to really go overseas. It was just after the Korean War. I had some friends in college that entered going in the war to Korea. So I was able to bypass that because I was deferred going to college all that time. And as soon as I graduated I got my greetings.

MR: So you ended up in a different way going to a war with Bob Hope. Is that correct?

HE: Um hum.

MR: I was wondering what the various conditions were like when you were playing for the service men and women in Vietnam. They would set up a stage for you and carry your own sound system?

HE: Oh that's right. I just went way to the right, didn't I? So as soon as I joined the band we started doing the Bob Hope Show and then along with that came the Christmas show. So we got all kinds of shots, got probably six or seven shots each — you know malaria and all kinds of other stuff. Because we'd go into jungle areas then into Alaska where it's freezing in the same two week time. So when we would fly to Bangkok that was our home away from home. Every day we'd fly over to Vietnam, about a two hour flight. I think it was about two hours, maybe less. And they wouldn't tell us where we were going until we got on the plane and then they'd issue us our information where we were going to the first job. And we would land, I think it was a 1 — a 130 — I don't recall the names of the planes but they're the kinds that are small and on the side of the fuselage they had the netted seats. Like the parachute jumpers when they'd sit there and then hook up and then go off the chairs, that's what they flew us in. And so we'd land at the camp, put the show on. They'd have the stage already set. No cover in a lot of places. And in Vietnam it was 105, 110 degrees out because in December that's their summer. And we had a

couple of guys, Butch Stone and Lou Ciotti, a tenor player, both kind of fainted on stage you know because of the heat and the sun bearing down on us. And the military always gave us their hats, you know, Squad 47 or whatever the names. I've got a collection of these caps in the garage that I kept all these years. But you know the troops, when we were through playing and performing, they'd come up to the band and thank us so much for being there, you know leaving home over Christmas to entertain them. And I thought then you know even if I didn't get paid I'd want to do this, just because of how I felt doing it.

MR: When we see movies about Vietnam now, usually the soundtrack are tunes from pop radio that were occurring during the Vietnam War — Sly & the Family Stone and that kind of thing. Yet you're saying that these young men were responding to music that had more to do with their parents than it did with them.

HE: You know the big band era, it started to fold I guess when Tommy Dorsey died. I did get a chance to work with Bob Crosby but he wasn't a big band then, but he was an old guy, an old band. But the bands were still working pretty well. Les Brown was working well, the road bands — you had road bands out there like Ray Anthony. When I got there I remember we were in Da Nang performing. When we would land where the Freedom Hill was where they'd have 25,000 troops sitting up on the hill and they had a stage facing the hill. They'd bus us over to it, which was about a mile over to this hill, through a little village, a Vietnamese village. So there was a jeep in front of us with one of these machine guns in there and the guy's standing up with a machine gun and a jeep behind us with the same machine gun. And the bus that we were in they had real tight metal nets across the windows so nobody could launch a grenade in. So you're driving down this road, a dirt road, and you're looking at the village and there's dogs running around and Vietnamese people kind of looking up, and we're going through and I had a kind of an eerie feeling but anyway when we — after we did that show we got back in the plane — in fact that's coming back to me. The reason why we kind of left in a hurry was the sun was going down behind the hill and so we hadn't finished the show but the general in charge of the troops there jumped up on stage and had to interrupt Bob Hope and tell him, "Bob, we've got to dismiss the troops, the sun is going down, we can't take a chance." And they dismissed all the troops. They got us in our helicopters. They had helicopters to fly us down to the runway. We got in a plane and took off. And as we were taking off I could hear, well we could hear, "Bing bing bing." And ground fire hit our plane and then we swerved, came around and landed so they could check the fuselage and make sure no gas lines were hit. And after about 15 minutes they cleared the airfield and we took off and went back to Bangkok. So that was kind of a scary moment.

MR: I think that that probably put every other gig you played for the rest of your life in some kind of perspective.

HE: It did.

The next time I start to moan about a gig, the hour drive, the load in and the lousy acoustics, Hal's "we were shot at" gig story should help keep things in perspective.

If we look at the big picture, the musician soldier made out fairly well, especially during times of relative global peace. In many cases their skills improved through constant performing and handling the diverse musical tasks required of them. A number of our most accomplished artists today played their way through the military and immediately renewed their career paths afterwards. A case in point. Google drummer icon Steve Gadd performing "Cissy Strut" with The U.S. Army Studio Band. He rips it up, surrounded by marvelous big band musicians. Only their Army uniforms make them stand out from any other early hot 1970s jazz band. Today's military branches boast jazz, funk, rock and classical ensembles, all performing at the highest level.

Time to send out a grateful acknowledgement to our Jazz Backstory team, my tech savvy Hamilton student assistant and fine saxophonist Michael Ko, our transcriptionist and editor Romy Britell, and digital scholarship technologist Doug Higgins. Episodes 31 and 32 will offer something that we can always use more of, Words of Wisdom, offered up by a wise group of jazz veterans.

See you on the flip side.

[audio interlude]