

Jazz Backstory Podcast

Episode #31 — Jazz Advice: The Practical and the Profound, Part 1

[audio introduction]

Welcome to Jazz Backstory, Episode 31. Think of this episode as the last chorus of Season 4 and the next episode as the coda. If you started our podcast with Season 1 you've recognized that our oral history sessions yielded numerous themes and topics common to all musicians. I can't claim that this was totally by design. I believe interviews that are actually semi-improvised conversations have the best chance of being both informative and entertaining. That being said, I do have a few questions that need to be asked, especially of the veterans who've paid their dues in the jazz world. One question goes something like this. "Do you have any practical advice or words of wisdom to young musicians who hope to have a career in jazz?" With that in mind, our title for these last two episodes is Jazz Advice: The Practical and the Profound.

Why not start at the top with saxophonist Phil Woods? We have heard from Mr. Woods in the previous episodes. He's extremely quotable. Here's his take on the question, from November 8th, 1999:

MR: Do you have advice for, you know aspiring jazz musicians that might help them in their careers?

PW: Well — advice for young jazzmen? No. I figure that if they're going to do it, no matter what I say they're going to do it. It's for those ones in between, those ones that aren't really sure, those are the ones I worry about. I mean I think jazz is only for those that have no choice. I think if you're a young man and you're entertaining thoughts of becoming a brain surgeon or a jazz tenor man, I'd go with the brain surgery, you know what I mean? If you have a choice. If you've got two burning desires, don't pick jazz. I mean keep playing it, I mean sometimes I envy the amateur, like all those dentists and doctors who play for kicks. They don't have to worry about making bread at it. They really enjoy making music. And that's really what it's about. Never forget that joy, that first time you made a note and it made you feel good. Musicians kind of forget that stuff, you know, they're sitting in the pit and reading *The Wall Street Journal* and grumpy, grumpy, grumpy. They forgot that feeling, that burn in the belly the first time they sounded decent. And it's easy to get kind of trapped into just making some bread and trying to exist when the bloom is off the rose. But a young man should consider — you

only have one life. When you make a choice, a career decision, it should be well thought out. Not too carefully structured mind you, but I wouldn't rush into anything. I wouldn't rush to go to a jazz school or any university. I always recommend take a year off, man. Hitchhike around the world. Take your horn and see if you can play for your supper around the world. See what life is about while you can, before you have a family, before you need bread. Get a couple of thou and just do it. Just do it, man. Take a chance. Because you might never have a chance to do it, and that's when you can really kind of get inside your head. It's hard to do it when you're surrounded by your peers or family or the pressures of society that you know — go somewhere where it's all fresh and pursue your muse — find out who you are. And then when you decide, you're going to be a much better player for this experience.

MR: Well you know I think you just gave some good advice in spite of yourself.

PW: Darn. There goes my image as the curmudgeon.

Phil Woods could be a curmudgeon, but not on the day we had our chat. He was in a reflective mood and believed he could offer some useful advice to young musicians. Wisdom worthy of attention I think, considering he had been named the top alto saxophonist in *DownBeat* magazine some 30 times. He spoke of career choices, of a young person choosing jazz. Perhaps it's the other way around. Fellow saxophonist Jerry Bergonzi offered his opinion during our June 2022 interview.

MR: Do you feel that jazz chose you somehow? I read that you had an uncle that was one flight up from you, yeah, and was a jazz musician. So I'm wondering if you had other choices when you were a kid? Do you have other passions that you sort of had to decide one or the other?

JB: You know I might be a boring person to answer this but I didn't. You know? I mean I just — of course like all young kids when I started playing I was eight years old on clarinet. I didn't take it seriously. Yeah it was something I was just doing. And my first record was a little Lester Young record with Count Basie you know, those recordings. "Tickle Toe" and the Kansas City Six or Seven, I forget what it is. And then I started some other Count Basie, Duke Ellington records, and then I got a small — but right from the get-go I was listening to that. And then a friend, 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.

You’ve got to have a way to support your jazz habit! There’s a bit of sobering advice. Back in Episode 8 we included casuals and club dates as vocabulary words. These are the type of gigs Jerry was referring to, they were never particularly lucrative but two or three a week helped pay the rent. Nowadays they are fewer and farther between and for even less bread. Trombonist Dan Barrett continues the gig thread and suggests how to be prepared for the ones that still exist.

MW: As a parting question, if you had a word of wisdom to give to students that you know will be watching this tape, students trying to make their way in the profession of jazz and understand the idiom, just a parting shot.

DB: Yeah, I actually think I have something pertinent to say. I would advise them that in their practicing as they’re playing scales and as they’re playing exercises and trying to improve their technique, I would take about 25 or 30 percent of that time, or a margin of that practice time and use it to study songs. And go out and buy sheet music, not just lead sheets with the chord symbols, but shell out the bucks that it takes and go out and buy Cole Porter songs and go out and buy George Gershwin songs you know. And look at them and look at the piano parts, even if you don’t play piano. And it takes forever, I mean if you’re not a piano player, but it’s worth the effort to sit at a keyboard and hear how those inner voices move. And if you spent, or if the student spent a little bit of his time, his practice time, doing that, analyzing these songs by these great songwriters he’d learn how to construct a line. Because after all these are great composers you know. And what we’re trying to do in jazz ostensibly is to compose, even though we’re composing spontaneously.

MW: Instant composition.

DB: We’re trying to compose. One student said, “Well Mr. Barrett, this is all well and good, but when are we going to get into the Lydian modes and all of that?” And I say, well I said, “Somebody else can teach you that better than I can,” and I said, “I think any knowledge is good.” And I said, “It’d probably benefit you greatly to know about that.”

But I said, “I’ll tell you something. Playing in clubs, I’ve received five dollars here and there to play ‘Body and Soul’ and I’ve received ten dollar tips to play ‘Stardust’ and I’ve gotten a couple of bucks to play ‘Shanty in an Old Shantytown’ for people.” I said, “I don’t think I’ve ever made a dime to play a Lydian mode for anybody. It’s great to know about that stuff, but I think you’d be better off, you know I’m addressing students now, I think you’d be much better off and stand a much greater chance to make a living in a fairly competitive business if you learn these songs and learn them correctly, and you can play them so you make people happy.

Yes, I agree, play songs people know, like this one:

[audio interlude]

Okay, it’s not really a tune, although it does have a distinguished title: the Circle of Fifths, sometimes called the Secret of Life. Seriously, I totally concur with Mr. Barrett. Having a substantial list of recognizable jazz standards at the ready helps make your phone ring. At the ready by the way, does not mean having them on your iPad or iPhone. They should be ready in your head and under your fingers. Before we move on, perhaps our Orchestra In A Nutshell can offer up that Circle from a different angle.

[audio interlude]

Nicely done and far superior to a Lydian mode. If you want to know what that actually is, don’t ask Dan Barrett, or me. I guess you can use your phone. Two of the most successful musicians I have spoken to had marvelous advice to share. First up, trumpeter Wayne Bergeron, a guy who can do it all, and has, with everyone from Green Day to Rosemary Clooney. Here is an excerpt from our December 2020 interview.

MR: Do you find it necessary to have an ego in your business or is it better not to have one?

WB: Well I mean if you’re a drummer, a trumpet player, or a rock guitarist, there’s a certain amount of confidence — you know when you’re playing by yourself, you’re playing a solo, there’s a certain amount of confidence we all need and so I don’t think it should cross the line into ego but you need to have enough confidence in your own abilities I think. As the great George Graham, who was a great lead trumpet player, once told me there’s a fine line between getting discovered and found out. And so I think it’s the same thing between confidence and ego.

MR: Can you explain that? Being discovered and found out?

WB: Well for instance, I've always been of the school that if you play music you don't really need to say anything. We don't even need to be speaking the same language. You could be speaking French and I could be speaking Spanish. But if we picked up our instruments and just played we know everything we need to know about each other's ability. Right? So there's a lot of musicians, and this is where the ego comes in, where they have to talk a big game. Because maybe there's some insecurities in their own playing that they want to hide. And so that's the ego part of it you know what I mean. And so George used to say that, you know people talk about how good they are, and then when you hear them play finally well you just got found out. Instead of getting discovered — and you can get discovered by just, and I tell students this all the time, they want to know, "Oh how do I get work?" And I go, "Well you're asking the wrong question." I go, "You need to hone your craft." And I go, "And when you play really well," I go, "good news travels fast." I said, "And if you don't play really well, I said, "that news still travels really fast." So it kind of takes care of itself, you know, the whole ego thing. Because all you need to know is to listen to somebody play, you know what they're all about. So it's best that you keep your mouth shut and play I guess is the moral to the story. You know I've always kind of tried to have been of that mindset.

And from Tom "Bones" Malone, trombonist, trumpeter, bassist, arranger and Blues Brother.

MR: It's like you've cloned yourself to be in so many places seemingly in the same time.

TM: Well the more versatile you are the more gigs you're going to get.

MR: Well then you just answered my next question, was that you know your neighbor's son takes you aside and go, "I'd really like to have some advice, I'd like to do what you did, I'd like to be a full time musician." And they're like 17. Do you have anything to say to them considering how much the business has changed?

TM: Well when I started, I started practicing when I was around 13 I was practicing four, five hours a day, all the way through high school. I was living on a farm in the middle of nowhere in South Mississippi and I didn't want to stay on the farm and milk cows and haul hay, picking corn. Nothing wrong with that, there's nothing wrong with that it just wasn't for me. You know farming is an honorable profession but I practiced because I heard this record by Urbie Green and I wanted to move to New York and be a professional musician so I practiced. My mother would say, "Tommy it's time to go to sleep now, it's time to stop playing." So I might stay up a little later and noodle around

on the piano trying to figure out what the notes were on a record, but you know you've got to do the work.

MR: Right. If I went back to my original question, why — why did these people call you back, make referrals, say oh you want to do this now? I mean after that first Gil Evans gig is it as simple as that you were good and you were easy to get along with?

TM: Well as I mentioned before, I have a degree in psychology and I found that just be nice to everybody, regardless of whether you're a lawyer or an accountant or whatever your career is, be nice to people. It always pays off. I've worked with musicians that have difficult personalities and they tend to be traded off for somebody else. I mean if they can hire me or another guy that have similar professional skills who are they going to call? They're going to call the nice guy. The guy that gets along with everybody.

MR: Yeah I know exactly what you're saying because like all musicians who book gigs, you know you get a gig and then sometimes you have to put a band together and you look at your list. The best player may not be the one you call first, because the best player may have some baggage going on and who needs that?

TM: I agree with you one hundred percent. Now I'm not saying that being a nice guy is going to get you gigs. You have to do the work. You have to be able to sight read, you have to be able to improvise, you have to be able to play in tune, you have to be able to play in time. You know there's all sorts of skills that we have to get. You have to get the skills. But when you have the skills and you treat people nicely doors will open.

[audio interlude]

Realistically, no work environment is populated totally with nice people. Drummer and band leader Terri Lyne Carrington speaks about the inevitable conflicts as well as the almighty dollar.

MR: Have you ever had situations, studio work or where you really wished you hadn't got into, because you either dislike the music or the people, and how do you deal with that?

TC: It's so funny like when I get into a situation where I don't like the music my body reacts. Like my back starts aching and I'm like this. It's hard to sit up straight and just get into it. And everything starts to hurt. It is really funny. And as far as people, I get along with most people. I don't have any real personality conflicts with people so that's not normally very much of an issue. Because I think you have to take responsibility in your relationships with people and be the kind of person I think — you have to have a certain kind of attraction or magnetic attraction that attracts people to you as opposed to thinking that other people have to have that. I mean you can affect your environment, opposed to

letting your environment affect you. That's actually a Buddhist concept. Person and environment have a oneness. And so when you get into a situation that's not optimal, rather than let that situation dictate your reaction or your response to it because it's not optimum, the better way is to get in and say well what can I do to improve the situation. What can I do to influence it more positively.

MR: Is it safe to say that you don't get into this music to make money?

TC: Well you don't get into it, I don't think, with that in mind. Who would ever pick this music if that's what they really only had in mind? But I think, you know, depending on your open mindedness, depending on, you know, maybe even how much of a purist you are, I think it's possible to make money and live a decent lifestyle for playing jazz. Obviously you have to be very good because you have to work a lot do to so. It may not be the greatest living but most of the times I think that most musicians are somewhat happy. And I think at the end of their lives if they haven't accomplished maybe all the things that they want to they do run into some bitterness but for the most part when you're good at it, yeah you can live a fruitful life and you develop very strong relationships and it's the community that sometimes really keeps you grounded and helps contribute to your understanding of why you do it in the first place. I think you have to find your happiness but it can't really be based — happiness in general can't really be based on things outside of yourself.

Young musicians, are you listening? In the recent *DownBeat* Critics Poll Terri Lyne was voted best drummer and her ensemble Social Science was voted Best Band. And she shares practical and profound advice.

Rick Montalbano is an outstanding Central NY pianist, a dear friend, and a repository of useful advice for aspiring musicians. We recently had a contest of a sort, which one of us could offer the most *practical* piece of advice regarding those aforementioned casuals and club dates. I thought mine was a winner. Ready? "Always bring your own extension cord!" Go ahead Rick, top that.

RM: My only advice is don't ever leave your wallet in the dressing room when you go on stage. That's it. It's the only advice I can give.

MR: That's a good one. It came from experience huh?

RM: That's right.

MR: God forbid you should lose your musicians union card.

I came in second, and I can live with that. But you go ahead and try asking the grumpy club owner for an extension cord.

I think this advice in Episode 31, born of many years in the jazz trenches, deserves a review, a sort of extreme Cliff's Notes. Here's a line or two from our contributors:

When you play really well, the news travels fast.

I'd go with the brain surgery.

Don't ever leave your wallet in the dressing room.

You have to have a magnetic attraction that attracts people.

If you don't play really well, that news travels really fast.

I've never made a dime playing a Lydian mode.

Keep your mouth shut and play.

Bring your own extension cord.

Who would ever pick this music if money's what they had in mind?

Just be nice, It always pays off.

You can hear and view the full interviews with all these artists on the Fillius Jazz YouTube channel. Our next episode offers up words of wisdom of a profound nature, not a stretch to describe them as Life Lessons. We'll go out with an excerpt of one of my compositions, inspired by a practical concern. I was up against a recording session deadline and needed one more original tune. The result, born of desperation, was titled "That's What I Needed." See you on the flip side.

[audio interlude]